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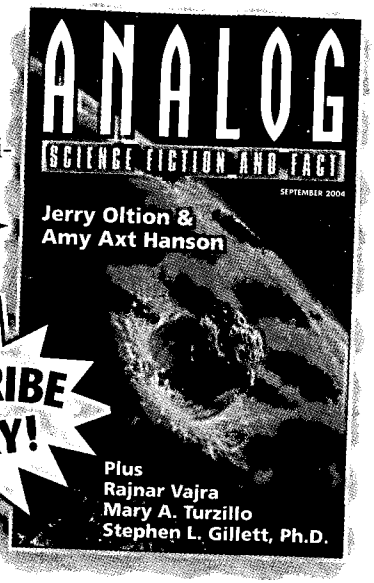


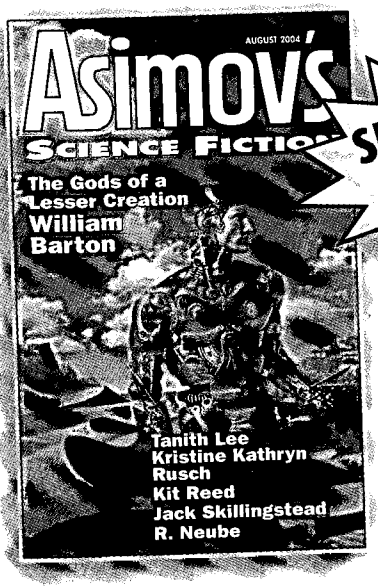


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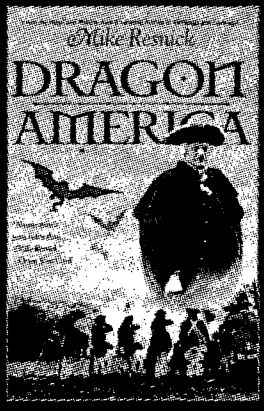


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August 2005

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"The Surface of Mercury"
by Chesley Bonestell


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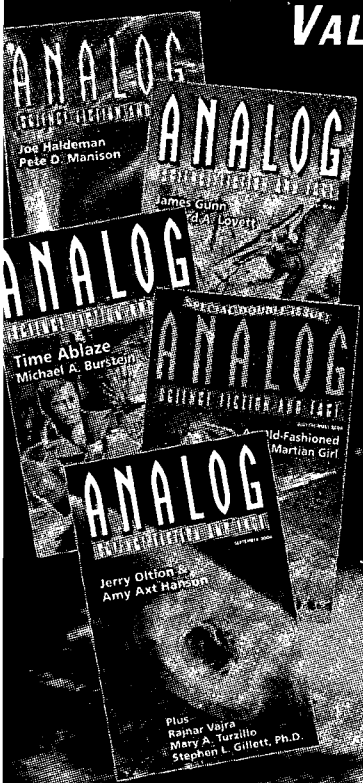


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# EDITORIAL

by Sheila Williams

## THE 2005 DELL MAGAZINES AWARD

The Dell Magazines Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing is co-sponsored by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and Dell Magazines. As the publisher of two of the science fiction field's leading magazines, *Asimov's Science Fiction* and *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, Dell takes the magazines' responsibility for discovering and nurturing new talent seriously. In addition to providing the Dell Magazines Award's five hundred dollar first prize and prizes for the runners-up, Dell sponsors the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Author that is bestowed during the annual Hugo-award ceremony. The Dell Magazines Award is also supported by the School of Mass Communications, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida. The judges for the award are Rick Wilber, who oversees the administration of the award, and who reads every single submission, and me.

This spring, I flew to Florida to meet a charming crew of finalists for the awards at the annual Conference on the Fantastic that is held in Ft. Lauderdale. One of the winners, Madeline B. Sheldon-Dante of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, could not be on hand to collect her honorable mention award for "Astep." Fortunately, though, the rest of the finalists were able to attend the conference. As always, I had chosen my favorite stories from a blind read of the contestants. Still, there were a number of familiar faces among the winners. One of these was Amelia Beamer, a recent graduate of Michigan State University. Amelia (last year's second runner-up) received an honorable mention for "The First Stone." She is now working full time as an editorial assistant for *Locus*—SF's leading trade magazine. Another honorable-mention finalist, Catherine Krahe, received a citation for her captivating fantasy, "Undine." Cassie is a biology student at Illinois Wesleyan, who intends to pursue a Ph.D. in molecular biology and genetics.

One of last year's honorable mentions, Michail Velichansky, an English major at the University of Maryland—College Park, was this year's third runner-up for his horror story, "Evelyn." I was happy to discover that Michail had recently sold this year's tale to *Fantastical Visions Vol. 4*.

Our second runner-up, Alice Kim, is studying science and technology in society at Stanford University. Alice received her award for her chilling short story, "Are You Getting All of This?" In addition to her award certificate, both she and Michail will receive one-year subscriptions to *Asimov's*.

Eliza Blair, our first runner-up, is a physics major at Swarthmore college. She received her award for the delightfully inventive tale about "Friends in Need." Eliza was pleased to learn that she would



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Left to right: Michail Velichansky, Sheila Williams, Eliza Blair, Alice Kim, Rick Wilber, Anthony Ha, Amelia Beamer, and Catherine Krahe.

also be getting a two-year subscription to *Asimov's*.

This year's winner, Anthony Ha, is an undergraduate in urban studies at Stanford University. He is the first repeat winner of our award. Last year, Anthony won first prize for "Orbiting," which is now up at our website. This year, he received the award for his wonderfully claustrophobic tale of a journey "Around the World." Anthony has one more year of school to go, so I may just see him in Florida next year!

In addition to attending panels and listening to academic papers and readings, the students were lucky enough to spend some time sitting around the pool with fellow authors like Brian W. Aldiss, Judith Berman, Suzy McKee Charnas, John Clute, John Crowley, Andy Duncan, Stephen Donaldson, Kathleen Goonan, Eileen Gunn, Joe Haldeman, Elizabeth Hand, Nalo Hopkinson, John Kessel, Ellen Klages, Kelly Link, David Lunde, Rudy Rucker, and Peter Straub.

Dell Magazines is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all art forms, disciplines, and media. I'm pleased that this year's winners were a gifted group of people with much to add to the fantastic in the arts.

Please turn to page 135 for information on how to apply for next year's award. O



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# REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

## THE GREATNESS OF CORNELIUS DRIBLE

I've spent the last couple of years nibbling away at a vast and remarkable book, Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*—its sixth edition, the one of 1651, the last that its eccentric author revised and corrected himself. (My own copy, which I've owned for many years, is a reprint of a 1927 edition with modern spelling and typography.)

One does not sit down and *read* Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* straight through, end to end, any more than one would sit down and eat five pounds of foie gras or a bucketful of beluga caviar. It is too rich, too extreme, for that sort of gluttony. I worked at it at a pace of four or five pages a day, sometimes not even that much; and since my copy runs to 984 pages, you can see how it came to pass that a project that I commenced in the autumn of 2002 was not completed until late in 2004. An extraordinary journey it was, too, and I propose to share some of its gleanings with you here.

Burton was a British scholar, born during the reign of Elizabeth the First, who spent most of his life as a cloistered and celibate bookworm at Christ Church College, Oxford. During those years he seems to have done nothing but study, with special emphasis on mathematics, religion, astrology, magic, medicine, religion, and classical literature. His sole creative endeavor was a play in Latin, *Philosophaster,* which had one performance at Oxford in 1617 and went unpublished until 1862. But for many years he assembled significant quotations from his vast reading, which seems to have taken in everything that had ever been written—Aristotle, Plato, Seneca, Montaigne, Rabelais, Chaucer, Erasmus, and on and on through the ages, down to his contemporaries Shakespeare and Marlowe. And out of this immense collection of material he began to shape, eventually, the book that has kept his name alive through the centuries.

Ostensibly *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is precisely what its name implies: an exhaustive study of the psychological ailment of depression. Evidently Burton suffered from it all his life. It was known to the ancients, he tells us, quoting the Roman physician Galen, who spoke of melancholy as "a malady that injures the mind, associated with profound depression and aversion from the things one loves best." But his enormous book is much more than a study of the causes and cures of the blues. He includes under "melancholy" virtually every sort of human passion, not just "heaviness and vexation of spirit," but also such phenomena as love, religious feeling, obsessive behavior of all kinds, the lust for power, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, until his book becomes a huge encyclopedia of esoteric information of all sorts, digressing in all directions to embrace medicine as it was known in his day, alchemy, witchcraft, geographical exploration, and just about everything else. All of this he



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expounds by means of quoting from hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the authoritative writers of the ages, weaving it together by means of the sort of opulent, splendiferously resounding prose that was the grand specialty of Elizabethan writers—as, for example, this:

> Give me but a little leave, and I will set before your eyes in brief a stupend, vast, infinite Ocean of incredible madness and folly: a Sea full of shelves and rocks, sands, gulfs, Euripuses, and contrary tides, full of calms, Halcyonian seas, unspeakable misery, such Comedies and Tragedies, such absurd and ridiculous, feral and lamentable fits, that I know not whether they are more to be pitied or derided, or may be believed, but that we daily see the same still practiced in our days, fresh examples, new news, fresh objects of misery and madness in this kind, that are still represented unto us, abroad, at home, in the midst of us, in our bosoms.

The first edition of this great and very odd conglomeration of a book appeared in 1621, a small thick quarto. Burton went on revising and enlarging his text, periodically releasing a new edition, until his death in 1640; the edition I read, the sixth, was based on notes and corrections that had been found among his papers. It has been reprinted constantly ever since, and is much beloved and admired to this day by those who have discovered its peculiar charm.

And why mention it in a science fiction magazine?

Let me begin answering that question, which will probably take two columns, by sharing with you one of Burton's innumerable little offhand references, offered without footnote or explanation, to something strange and phenomenal: in discussing the wonders of science (in which he includes alchemy) he tells us, on page 462, of the great achievements of a certain Cornelius Drible, which included "a perpetual motion, inextinguible [sic] lights, incombustible cloth, with many such feats."

Cornelius Drible! Perpetual motion! Incombustible cloth! I had to know more. But Burton gives us not another syllable, so far as I am able to detect, about the astounding achievements of this great but obscure man of science.

I turned, of course, to Google. (Googling for Drible! There's a statement that would have made no sense at all just a few years ago.) Google, alas, failed me here. It did lead me to a 1621 play by Ben Jonson, *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon,* nearly as obscure as Drible himself, in which it is announced that exciting news has lately come from the Moon, "but not," the playwright says, "by way of Cornelius Agrippa [a 16th-century German alchemist, much quoted by Burton] or Cornelius Drible." A dead end, this, though plainly Drible was enough of a household name in Ben Jonson's time to merit such a casual mention on stage.

Well. Off I went to a more conventional source of information: Oxford University Press's five-volume *History of Technology* (1957), which told me nothing of Cornelius Drible but offered me, in Volume III, a couple of paragraphs on Cornelius *Drebbel* (1573-1633), a Dutchman living in London "whose inventions were extremely varied



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and attracted attention throughout Europe."

This had to be Burton's man—a victim of loose-jointed Elizabethan spelling of the sort that produced the "inextinguible" of a few paragraphs back. (Shakespeare himself seems to have spelled his own name in many different ways.) The Oxford History does not mention perpetual motion, but does credit Drebbel with "weapons devised for the Royal Navy, such as the flaming petards used off La Rochelle in 1628, a more economical method for making spirit of sulphur, thermostatic controls for chemical furnaces and incubators, and new processes for dyeing."

Hot on the trail of Mynheer Drebbel now, I turned next to my trusty Eleventh Edition *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911), the truest compendium of all knowledge, which told me that Drebbel, in 1630, had accidentally discovered the secret of dyeing wool a brilliant scarlet by means of adding cochineal to a solution of nitric acid and tin, an interesting datum but, well, not greatly exciting. It was from a later edition of the *Britannica,* the Fourteenth (1968), that I harvested the fact that among my man Drebbel's other inventions was nothing less than the first submarine.

He built it in 1620, a small craft consisting of a hull of greased leather over a wooden frame, and tested it in the Thames at depths of twelve to fifteen feet. Oars extending through tightly sealed flaps in its sides were the means of propulsion. Air tubes leading to the surface provided the passengers with oxygen. Over the next four years he built two somewhat larger models, and no less a personage than King James I is said to have gone for a brief ride in one.

A man who could invent a submarine in the seventeenth century could surely have taken a crack at a perpetual-motion machine, too, and so, armed now with the correct spelling of his name, I returned to Google and quickly turned up all the Drebbel information I sought, by way of the Cornelius Drebbel web site that the University of Twente in the Netherlands maintains in his honor. A Dutchman, he was, yes, who in his youth was apprenticed to the famous engraver and alchemist Hendrick Goltzius. While with Goltzius he developed an interest in chemistry and mechanical devices, and in 1598, at the age of twenty-five, did indeed invent what might well be called a sort of perpetual-motion machine.

It was, in fact, a clock, built around a sealed glass vial containing water. Changes in atmospheric pressure caused the liquid to expand and contract, powering an arrangement of gears that would constantly rewind the clock. Ingenious, all right, although not really a device from which energy could perpetually be extracted without new input, which is what a true perpetual-motion machine ought to do. Nor have I been able to find anything about his inextinguible lights or his incombustible cloth. Dribble's clock, though, was clever enough so that King James, upon learning of it, brought him to England in 1604, primarily to be a technician in charge of the royal fireworks displays. But he tinkered with all sorts of devices, most notably a temperature regulator for ovens and furnaces that worked on the same closed-system principle as the clock. This he later developed into an incubator for hatching duck and chicken eggs that made use of what



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we now know as negative feedback to operate what seems to be the earliest known thermostat: when the temperature within the incubator rose beyond the desired level, air expanded, causing a blob of mercury to close a damper. When the air cooled again, the damper opened to admit more heat.

This versatile man moved along to the court of the Emperor Rudolf II in 1610 to take the post of chief alchemist, but the onset of the Thirty Years' War sent him hastily back to London a few years later. There he devoted himself to projects for draining swamps, designed his submarines, and produced some improvements on the compound microscope, which had been invented thirty years before by a fellow Dutchman, Zacharias Janssen. Then there was Drebbel's magic lantern for projecting images, his machine for grinding lenses, his telescope, his process for producing sulphuric acid—

And yet, for all this phenomenal display of technological genius, Cornelius Drebbel, who did not, alas, invent a perpetual-motion machine after all but who does deserve credit for the submarine and the thermostat, is today all but unknown outside his native land (though he does, at least, have a lunar crater named for him). But for that chance one-sentence reference in *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* his name would never have crossed my path. And, of course, this description of my quest for Burton's Cornelius Drible has distracted me from telling you more about Robert Burton and his marvelous book. But such a digression is in itself perfectly Burtonian. More about *The Anatomy of Melancholy* next time. O

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# LETTERS

Hello, Editor,

As you may guess from my stationery, I am visually impaired and "read" your magazine on tape. I look forward every month to hearing the great assortment of "SF."

You have my best wishes for a successful editorialship.

Kay Nyne Coyote

Dear Ms. Williams,

I have always been impressed by the high caliber of the writing in the magazine, however . . . that Lori Selke's story was printed makes me wonder if anyone on your editorial staff actually knows any science!

The crux of the Selke story is that the protagonist steals some blastulas of the future dodos, sneaks the frozen blastulas across international borders, and, after having them pass through airport X-ray, flies them home to his turkey farm where they are to be raised as un-improved (i.e., no pink feathers) dodos.

There is scant chance that any blastulae passing through airport X-ray machines could remain viable or sufficiently un-mutated by the X-rays to develop into the unimproved dodos he wants. Should they be viable, they're likely to be very, very deformed and/or cancer-ridden. It seems a pity that after all the high adventure and psychological distress that the protagonist and his computer-nerd acolyte go through, their efforts should be so soundly defeated by the teratogenic effects of X-rays.

I'm afraid that little flub spoiled my enjoyment of that story.

Perhaps someone should have caught this one earlier and suggested that the writer add a sentence or two to the effect that the protagonist takes a boat back (no airport X-ray) or even goes back to Mexico and then goes through customs by car to reach the turkey farm (again, no X-rays).

Oh well, maybe the changes could be made when the story's reprinted.

Manuella Adrian
Sunny Isles Beach, FL

*The author replies . . .*

Ms. Adrian is correct that there's a significant danger the X-rays would cause problems with the blastulae; that's one of the reasons Tomila mails Dr. Yeoh a back-up.

Lori Selke

Hi *Asimov's*,

I just wanted say that "Shadow Twin" was probably the best science fiction story I've read in years. If that's any indication of what Gardner can do now that he isn't busy being the editor of the magazine anymore, then more power to him!

Robert May
Dublin, OH

Sheila:

It was great seeing Shadow Twin in *Asimov's*. I did want to point out, for folks who might not have known, that Ellen Datlow originally had the story up at *Scifi.com*.

Thank you, and keep up the good work!

Daniel Abraham



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Dear Editor,

Norman Spinrad's "On Books" essay of April/May 2005 was interesting and thought-provoking.

However, if he is wrong about President Bush, he could be wrong about the purpose and future of science fiction. I do not read science fiction magazines about politics. I read political magazines and newspaper op-ed pages for that.

Carolyn Ostrom
Arlington, VA

Norman,

I subscribe to all four of the Dell magazines as well as *F&SF*, so I read a lot of book reviews. Most reviewers, well, review books. You take me places where I have never lived. You take me inside the art of writing and inside the world of publishing. Your reviews give me views of other real worlds while pointing out new speculative worlds that I might like to read about.

Please continue writing book reviews.

Rich Waikel

Dear *Asimov's*,

The same day I read Norman Spinrad's "No Surrender?" in your pages, I dropped by the nearest Barnes and Noble, and, sure enough, they've got a whole damned wall of "Star Trek" but not a single volume of Spinrad's. What's wrong with these people? There is no excuse for *Bug Jack Barron* ever to be out of print. It's as if you couldn't find *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. In my own library, on the shelves in the room where I now sit writing, I count twelve volumes of Mr. Spinrad's novels and stories, plus most of the *Asimov's* numbers in which his essays have been appearing these twenty-odd years.

Is it time to get seriously pissed off at this crap?

From 1988 to 1994, two women named Judy and Phoebe ran a science fiction bookstore in Richmond, Virginia. A labor of love, subsidized by their day jobs. A great store, the kind of place where I asked for J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* and they had it. They had plenty of Spinrad, too. They had everybody. Kim Stanley Robinson came for a signing. Lois McMaster Bujold.

After five years, they were doing well enough, they were ready to quit their day jobs. Then Barnes and Noble opened a "superstore" two miles up the road, and, in six months, Judy and Phoebe were out of business.

Readers, writers, citizens—the Thought Police are here. There's a war on, and I don't mean the war across the sea.

I hear you, Norman. Readers know and care, if publishers and booksellers don't.

No surrender!

Hank Roberts
Richmond, VA

*We agree that the out-of-print status of so many classic science fiction novels is disconcerting. We can happily report, however, that Norman's* Bug Jack Barron *is enjoying a new trade-paperback edition, available from Overlook Press.*

Dear Sheila,

How welcome it is to have you stepping on the scene at *Asimov's*! I'm liking what I'm reading!

I wanted to shore up the magazine *and* the writers of the magazine in their choice to write *literature* instead of washed-out, cleaned-up stories that pussyfoot around other people's sense of "decency" and "family values." While the subject of



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what, exactly, these words can and has taken up libraries of text, let me just say that it is not hard to figure out that the modern construction of these words—and the polemic they originate from—both render our world colorless, static, and homogenous, and imply a cultural elitism. Also, in harkening back to antiquated (or invented) ideas of how society should function, we lose our ability to explore and re-invent ourselves. Isn't exploration and re-invention what *Asimov's* is about?

In your April/May 2005 issue, a correspondent writes, "Lastly, since I'm a Christian, I don't like the profanity and immorality that some writers insist on using in their stories and columns."

I work for one of the largest not-for-profit Christian institutions in the world, and my job involves seeing hundreds of Christian families each year. Let me tell you something: being "Christian" does not preclude anyone from profanity. Nor does *not* being a Christian mean that you love the profane. Nor, really, does shivering from the use of profanity ensure a happy, Christian, or "moral" life.

I have seen numerous Christian leaders and evangelists curse and damn people in the name of God (as if they knew the mind of God—which is profane in itself), while many people who *pro forma* "curse" do not actually wish anyone burned eternally in hell. Which, I ask, is the real profanity?

Were I an author writing a story about my life as a Christian man helping Christian families, I would include profanity, because profanity and the people who use it are very much a part of my "Christian" world. Likewise, I want Mr. Silverberg and other writers including it in their stories. Profanity's part of life. It's in the universe that is, the universe that can be, and the universe that was. In short, any writer who writes of a science fiction future where everybody lives "morally"—and "profanity"—free would be creating a world that was damn hard to swallow.

More importantly, by imposing one moral viewpoint, we are precluding that morality can evolve with us. Just as five hundred years ago, in Europe, it was moral to marry children, abandon your wife, divest her of her earthly goods, etc., today that's not permitted. Rightly so! Science fiction with an all-encompassing static morality is not only ludicrous, but also heavingly dull. Morals change with the times, and if you think "traditional values" aren't post-modern constructions, you'd better put down *Asimov's* right away and pick up a history book to see what your no-so-distant ancestors thought was moral and just!

Kristian Jaech
Seattle, WA

Dear Sheila,

Perhaps there's a typo in Tom Robbins's letter in the April/May issue: "Lastly, since I am a Christian, I don't like the profanity and immortality that some writers use . . ." I can't understand what a Christian doesn't like about immortality. I always thought one of the aims of all beliefs is to obtain exactly that in the afterlife?

Martin Schrijvershof
Delft, The Netherlands

*The immortality/immorality confusion in Tom Robbins's letter was entirely a transcription error and not Mr. Robbins's fault. For timeliness sake, letters are usually dropped into type quickly and rarely have the advantage of undergoing a thorough review by our ace proofreader.*



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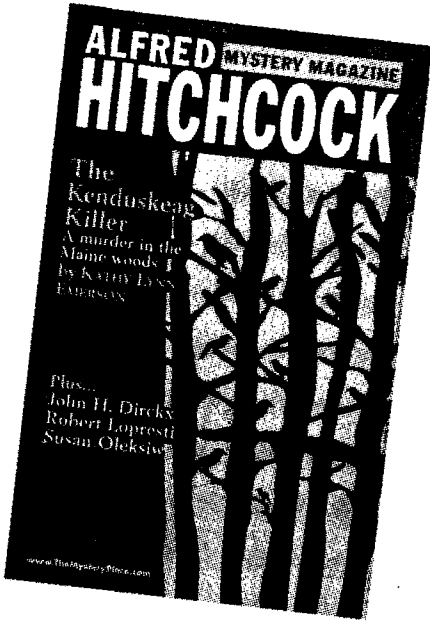


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# HE WOKE IN DARKNESS

Harry Turtledove

**Early on a cold and dark December morning—a day after I bought this tale from Harry Turtledove, and long after he'd written it—I was startled by the morning news. The synchronicity of the story on the radio about an arrest stemming from an event of decades past and the unsettling story in this magazine seems to prove that some historical incidents will haunt us for years to come. Harry's newest book, *Settling Accounts: Drive to the East* will be out in August from Del Rey. He recently edited *The Enchanter Completed,* a tribute anthology to L. Sprague de Camp that has just been published by Baen Books.**

**A word of warning: there are scenes in the following tale that may be disturbing to some readers.**

He woke in darkness, not knowing who he was. The taste of earth filled his mouth.

It shouldn't have ended this way. He knew that, though he couldn't say how or why. He couldn't even say what *this way* was, not for sure. He just knew it was wrong. He'd always understood about right and wrong, as far back as he could remember.

How far back was that? Why, it was . . . as far as it was. He didn't know exactly how far. That seemed wrong, too, but he couldn't say why.

Darkness lay heavily on him, unpierced, unpierceable. It wasn't the



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dark of night, nor even the dark of a closed and shuttered room at midnight. No light had ever come here. No light ever would, or could. Not the darkness of a mineshaft. The darkness of . . . the tomb?

Realizing he must be dead made a lot of things fall together. A lot, but not enough. As far back as he could remember . . . He couldn't remember *dying*, dammit. Absurdly, that made him angry. Something so important in a man's life, you'd think he would remember it. But he didn't, and he didn't know what he could do about it.

He would have laughed, there in the darkness, if only he could. He hadn't expected Afterwards to be like this. He didn't know how he'd expected it to be, but not like this. Again, though, what could he do about it?

*I can remember. I can try to remember, anyways.* Again, he would have laughed if he could. *Why the hell not? I've got all the time in the world.*

Light. An explosion of light. Afternoon sunshine blasting through the dirty, streaky windshield of the beat-up old Ford station wagon bouncing west down Highway 16 toward Philadelphia.

A bigger explosion of light inside his mind. A name! He had a name! He was Cecil, Cecil Price, Cecil Ray Price. He knew it like . . . like a man knows his name, that's how. That time without light, without self? *A dream*, he told himself. *Must have been a dream.*

Those were his hands on the wheel, pink and square and hard from years of labor in the fields. He was only twenty-seven, but he'd already done a lifetime's worth of hard work. It felt like a long lifetime's worth, too.

He took one hand off the wheel for a second to run it through his brown hair, already falling back at the temples. Had he dozed for a second while he was driving? He didn't think so, but what else could it have been? Lucky he didn't drive the wagon off the road into the cotton fields, into the red dirt.

They would love that. They would laugh their asses off. Well, they weren't going to get the chance.

Sweat ran down his face. His clothes felt welded to him. The air was thick with water, damn near thick enough to slice. The start of summer in Mississippi. It would stay like this for months.

He had the window open to give himself a breeze. It didn't help much. When it got this hot and sticky, nothing helped much. He ran his hand through his hair again, to try to keep it out of his eyes.

"You all right, Cecil?" That was Muhammad Shabazz. Along with Tariq Abdul-Rashid, he crouched down in the back seat. The two young Black Muslims didn't want the law, or what passed for the law in Mississippi in 1964, spotting them. They'd come down from the North to give the oppressed and disenfranchised whites in the state a helping hand, and the powers that be hated them worse than anybody.

"I'm okay," Cecil Price answered. *I'm okay now*, he thought. *I know who I am. Hell, I know* that *I am.* He shook his head. That moment of lightless namelessness was fading, and a good thing, too.

"We get to Meridian, everything'll be fine," Muhammad Shabazz said.

"Sure," Cecil said. "Sure." The night before, the locals had torched a



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white church over by Longdale. He'd taken the Northern blacks over there to do what they could for the congregation. Now . . .

Now they had to get through Neshoba County. They had to get past Philadelphia. They had to run the gauntlet of lawmen who hated white people and Black Knights of Voodoo who hated whites even more—and of lawmen who *were* Black Knights of Voodoo and hated whites most of all. And they had to do it in the Racial Alliance for Complete Equality's beat-up station wagon. If RACE's old blue Ford wasn't the best-known car in eastern Mississippi, Price was damned if he knew another one that would be.

Of course, he might be damned any which way. So might the two idealistic young Negroes who'd come down from New York and Ohio to give his down-trodden race a hand. If the law spotted this much too spottable car . . .

Cecil Price wished he hadn't had that thought right then, in the instant before he saw the flashing red light in his rear-view mirror, in the instant before he heard the siren's scream. Panic stabbed at him. "What do I do?" he said hoarsely. He wanted to floor the gas pedal. He wanted to, but he didn't. The main thing that held him back was the certain knowledge that the old wagon couldn't break sixty unless you flung it off a cliff.

"Pull over." Muhammad Shabazz's voice was calm. "Don't let 'em get us for evading arrest or any real charge. We haven't done anything wrong, so they can't do anything to us."

"You sure of that, man?" Tariq Abdul-Rashid sounded nervous.

"This is all about the rule of law," Muhammad Shabazz said patiently. "For us, for them, for everybody."

He respected the rule of law. It meant more to him than anything else. Cecil Price could only hope it meant something to the man in the car with the light and the siren. He could hope so, yeah. Could he believe it? That was a different story.

But Price didn't see that he had any choice here. He pulled off onto the shoulder. The brakes squeaked as he brought the blue Ford to a stop. Pebbles rattled against the car's underpanels. Red dust swirled up around it.

The black-and-white pulled up behind the Ford. A great big Negro in a deputy sheriff's uniform got out and swaggered up toward the station wagon. Cecil Price watched him in the mirror, not wanting to turn around. That arrogant strut—and the pistol in the lawman's hand—spoke volumes about the way things in Mississippi had been since time out of mind.

Coming up to the driver's-side door, the sheriff peered in through sunglasses that made him look more like a machine, a hate-driven machine, than a man. "Son of a bitch!" he exploded. "*You* ain't Larry Rainey!"

"No, sir," Price said. Part of that deference was RACE training—don't give the authorities an excuse to beat on you. And part of it was drilled into whites in the South from the time they could toddle and lisp. If they *didn't* show respect, they often didn't live to get a whole lot older than that.

Larry Rainey was older than Cecil Price and smarter than Cecil and



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tougher than Cecil, too. He'd been in RACE a lot longer than Cecil had. The Black Knights of Voodoo probably hated him more than any other white man from this part of the state.

But the way they hated Larry Rainey was like nothing next to the way they hated what they called the black agitators from the North. Even behind the deputy sheriff's shades, Cecil could see his eyes widen when he got a look at Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid. "Well, well!" he boomed, the way a man with a shotgun will when a couple of big, fat ducks fly right over his blind. "Looky what we got here! We got us a couple of buckra-lovin' ragheads!"

"Sheriff," Muhammad Shabazz said tightly. He didn't wear a turban, and never had. Neither did Tariq Abdul-Rashid, who nodded like somebody trying hard not to show how scared he was. Cecil Price was scared, too, damn near scared shitless, and hoped the black man with the the gun and the Smokey-the-Bear hat couldn't tell.

The deputy went on as if the Black Muslim hadn't spoken: "We got us a couple of Northern radicals who reckon they're better'n other folks their color, so they can hop on a bus and come down here and tell us how to live. And we got us one uppity buckra, too, sneakin' around and stirrin' up what oughta be damn well left alone. Well, I got news for y'all. That don't fly, not in Neshoba County it don't. What the hell you doin' here, anyway?"

"We were looking at what's left of Mount Zion Church in Longdale," Muhammad Shabazz answered.

"Yeah, I just bet you were. Fat lot your kind cares about churches," the big black deputy jeered.

"We care about justice, sir." Muhammad Shabazz spoke with respect that didn't come close to hiding the anger underneath. "I do, and Mr. Abdul-Rashid does, and Mr. Price does, too. Do you, sir? Does justice mean anything to you at all?"

"It means I know better'n to call a lousy, lazy, no-account buckra *Mister*. Ain't that right, Cecil?" When Price didn't answer fast enough to suit the deputy sheriff, the man stuck the pistol in his face and roared, "*Ain't that right, boy?*"

Muhammad Shabazz had nerve. If he didn't have nerve, he never would have ridden down to Mississippi from Cleveland in the first place. "We didn't do anything wrong, sir," he told the deputy. "We didn't even break any traffic laws. You have no good reason to pull us over. Why aren't you investigating real crimes, like a firebombed church?"

To Cecil Price's amazement, the deputy smiled the broadest, nastiest, wickedest smile he'd ever seen, and he'd seen some lulus. "What do you reckon I'm doin'?" he said. "What the hell do you reckon I'm doin'? All three of you sons of bitches are under arrest for suspicion of arson. A charge like that, you can rot in jail the rest of your worthless lives. Serve y'all right, too, you want to know what I think."

"You're out of your mind," Muhammad Shabazz exclaimed.

"We wouldn't burn a church," Tariq Abdul-Rashid agreed, startled out of his frightened silence. "That *is* crazy."

"We've got no reason to do anything like that. Why would we, sir?"



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Cecil Price tried to make the deputy forget his comrades didn't stay polite.

It didn't work. He might have known it wouldn't. Hell, he had known it wouldn't. "Why? I'll tell you why," the Negro in the lawman's uniform said. "So decent, God-fearing folks get blamed for it, that's why. You agitators'll try and pin it all on us, make us look bad on the TV, give the Federal government an excuse to stick its nose in affairs that ain't none of its business and never will be. So hell, yes, you're under arrest. Suspicion of arson, like I said. I'll throw your sorry asses in jail right now. You drive on into Philadelphia quiet-like, or you gonna do something stupid like try and escape?"

Cecil Price didn't need to be a college-educated fellow like the two blacks in the car with him to know what that meant. *You do anything but drive straight to jail and I'll kill all of you.* "I won't do anything dumb," he told the deputy.

"Better not, boy, or it's the last fuckup you ever pull." The big black man threw back his head and laughed. "Unless you already pulled your last one, that is." Laughing still, he walked back to the black-and-white. He opened the door, got in—the shocks sagged under his bulk—and slammed it shut.

"Let him jail us on that stupid trumped-up charge," Muhammad Shabazz said as Price started the Ford's engine. "It'll do just as much to help the cause as the church bombing."

"I hope you're right," Price said, pulling back onto the highway, "but he's a mean one. The Neshoba County Sheriff's meaner, but the deputy's bad enough and then some."

"You think he's BKV?" Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.

"Black Knights of Voodoo?" Price shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised if he goes night-riding with a mask and a shield and a spear."

In Philadelphia, a few people stared at the car with the white and the two blacks in it. Cecil Price didn't care for those stares, not even a little bit. He didn't care for any part of what was going on, but he couldn't do a thing about it. He parked in front of the jail. The deputy's car pulled up right behind the RACE wagon.

Another black deputy sat behind the front desk when Price and Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid walked into the jail. "What the hell's goin' on here?" he asked the man who'd arrested the civil-rights workers.

"Suspicion of arson," the first deputy answered. "I reckon they must've had somethin' to do with torchin' the white folks' church over by Longdale."

"That's the—" What was the man behind the desk about to say? *That's the silliest goddamn thing I ever heard*? Something like that—Cecil Price was sure of it. But then the other Negro's eyes narrowed. "Fuck me," he said, and pointed first to Muhammad Shabazz and then to Tariq Abdul-Rashid. "Ain't these the raghead bastards who came down from the North to raise trouble?"

"That's them, all right," said the deputy who'd arrested them. "And this



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here buckra's Cecil Price. I thought at first I got me Larry Rainey—you know how all these white folks look alike. But what the hell? If you can't grab a big fish, a little fish'll do."

"That's a fact," said the deputy behind the desk. "That sure as hell is a fact, all right. Yeah, lock 'em up. We can figure out what to do with 'em later."

"You betcha." The first deputy marched his prisoners to the cells farther back in the jail. "In here, you two," he told Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid, and herded them into the first cell on the right. He stuck Cecil Price in the second cell on the right. Even at a time like this, even in a situation like this, he never thought to put a white man in with Negroes. That was part of what was wrong in Philadelphia, right there.

After Price and Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid were safely locked away, the man who'd arrested them clumped up the corridor and then out the front door. "Where you goin'?" called the man behind the desk.

"Got to see the Priest," the first deputy answered. "Anybody asks after those assholes, you never seen 'em, you never heard nothin' about 'em. You got that?"

"All right by me," the other deputy said. The first one slammed the door after him as he went out. He seemed to have to slam any door he came to.

Cecil Price had only thought he was scared shitless before. Not letting anybody know he and his friends were in jail was bad. Going to see the Priest was a hell of a lot worse. The Priest was a tall, scrawny, bald black man who hated whites with a fierce and simple passion. He was also the chief Neshoba County recruiting officer for the Black Knights of Voodoo. Trouble followed him the way thunder followed lightning.

Price wondered whether Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid knew enough to be as frightened as he was. The Priest had been trouble for years, while they'd been down here only a couple of months. The Priest would still be trouble long after they went back to the North . . . if they ever got the chance to go North again.

It must have been about half past five when the phone at the front desk jangled loudly. "Neshoba County Jail," the deputy there said. He paused to listen, then went on, "No, I ain't seen 'em. Jesus Christ! You lose your garbage, you expect me to go pickin' it up for you?" He slammed the phone down again.

"Deputy!" Muhammad Shabazz called through the bars of his cell. "Deputy, can I speak to you for a minute?"

A scrape of chair legs against cheap linoleum. Slow, heavy, arrogant footsteps. A deep, angry voice: "What the hell you want?"

"I'd like to make a telephone call, please."

A pause. Cecil Price looked out of his cell just in time to see the deputy sheriff shake his head. His big, round belly shook, too, but it didn't remind Price of a bowlful of jelly—more of a wrecking ball that would smash anything in its way. "No, I don't reckon so," he said. "You ain't callin' nobody."

"I have a Constitutional right to make a telephone call," Muhammad Shabazz insisted, politely but firmly.

"Don't you give me none of your Northern bullshit," the Negro deputy



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said. "Constitution doesn't say jack shit about telephone calls. How could it? No telephones when they wrote the damn thing, were there? *Were* there, smartass?"

"No, but—" Muhammad Shabazz broke off.

"Constitutional right, my ass," the deputy sheriff said. "You got a Constitutional right to get what's comin' to you, and you will. You just bet you will." He lumbered back to the desk.

In a low voice, Cecil Price said, "We're in deep now."

"No kidding." Muhammad Shabazz sounded like a man who wanted to make a joke but was too worried to bring it off.

"They aren't gonna let us out of here," Tariq Abdul-Rashid said. "Not in one piece, they aren't."

"We'll see what happens, that's all," Muhammad Shabazz said. "They can't think they'll get away with it." To Cecil Price, that only proved the man who'd come down from the North didn't understand how things really worked in Mississippi. Of course the deputy sheriffs thought they'd get away with it. Why wouldn't they? Blacks had been getting away with things against whites who stepped out of line ever since slavery days. Times were starting to change; Negroes of goodwill like Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid were helping to make them change. But they hadn't changed yet—and the deputies and their pals were determined they wouldn't change no matter what. And so . . .

*And so we're in deep for sure*, Cecil Price thought, fighting despair.

The first deputy sheriff, the one who'd arrested them, returned to the jail not long after the sun went down. He walked back to the cells to look at the prisoners, laughed a gloating laugh, and then went up front again.

"What's the Priest got to say?" asked the man at the front desk.

"It's all taken care of," the first deputy answered.

"They comin' here?"

"Nah." The first deputy sounded faintly disappointed. "It'd be too damn raw. We'd end up with the fuckin' Feds on our case for sure."

"What's going on, then?"

The first deputy told him. He pitched his voice too low to let Cecil Price make it out. By the way the desk man laughed, he thought it was pretty good. Price was sure *he* wouldn't.

Time crawled by on hands and knees. The phone rang once, but it had nothing to do with Price and Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid. It was a woman calling to find out if her no-account husband was sleeping off another binge in the drunk tank. He wasn't. But it only went to show that, despite the struggle for whites' civil rights, ordinary life in Philadelphia went on.

Around half past ten, the first deputy came tramping back to the cells again. To Cecil Price's amazement, he had a jingling bunch of keys on a big brass key ring with him. He opened the door to Price's cell. "Come on out, boy," he said. "Reckon I've got to turn you loose."

Price wanted to stick a finger in his ear to make sure he'd heard right. "You sure?" he blurted.

"Yeah, I'm sure," the deputy said. "I been askin' around. You weren't at



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the church when it went up. Neither were these assholes." He pointed into the cell that held Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid. "Gotta let them go, too, dammit."

"You'll hear from our lawyers," Muhammad Shabazz promised. "False arrest is false arrest, even if you think twice about it later. This is still a free country, whether you know it or not."

Although Cecil Price agreed with every word he said, he wished the Black Muslim would shut the hell up. Pissing off the deputy right when he was letting them out of jail wasn't the smartest move in the world, not even close. But Price walked out of his cell. A moment later, Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid walked out of theirs, too.

The deputy with the wrecking-ball belly at the front desk gave them back their wallets and keys and pocket change. "If you're smart, you'll get your white ass outa Philadelphia. Go on down to Meridian and never come back," he told Cecil Price. "You cause trouble around here again, you look at a black woman walkin' down the street around here again, you show your ugly buckra face around here again, you are fuckin' dead meat. You hear me?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I sure do hear you," Cecil Price said. That was how you played the game in Mississippi. Price hadn't promised to do one thing the deputy said. But he'd heard him, all right. He couldn't very well not have heard him.

"Go on, then. Get lost."

The first deputy walked out into the muggy night with the white man and the two Northern blacks. A mosquito buzzed around Price's ear. Price slapped at it. The deputy laughed. He watched while Price and the Black Muslims got into RACE's blue Ford wagon. Price started up the car. The deputy went on watching as he put it in gear and drove away. In the rear-view mirror, Price watched him walk back into the Neshoba County Jail.

"Maybe they really are learning they can't pull crap like that on us," Tariq Abdul-Rashid said.

"Don't bet on it," was Muhammad Shabazz's laconic response. "They don't back up unless they've got a reason to back up. Isn't that right, Cecil? . . . Cecil?"

Cecil Price didn't answer, not right away. His eyes were on the rear-view mirror again. He didn't like what he saw. This time of night, driving out of a little town like Philadelphia, they should have had the road to themselves. They should have, but they didn't. One, then two, sets of headlights followed them out of town. Price stepped on the gas. If those cars back there weren't interested in him and his black friends, he'd lose them.

"Hey, man, take it easy," Tariq Abdul-Rashid said. "You don't want to give the law a chance to run us in for speeding."

"We've got company back there," Price said. Speeding up hadn't shaken those two cars. If anything, they were closer. And a third set of headlights was coming out of Philadelphia, zooming down Highway 19 like a bat out of hell.

Tariq Abdul-Rashid and Muhammad Shabazz looked back over their shoulders. "You think they're on our tail, Cecil?" Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.



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Before Price could say anything, Muhammad Shabazz said everything that needed saying: "Gun it! Gun it like a son of a bitch!"

The old Ford's motor should have roared when Cecil Price jammed the pedal to the metal. Instead, it groaned and grunted. Yeah, the wagon went faster, but it didn't go faster fast enough. The two pairs of headlights behind the Ford got bigger and bigger, brighter and brighter, closer and closer. And the third pair, the set that got the late start, might almost have been flying along Highway 19. That was one souped-up set of wheels, and the rustbucket Price was driving didn't have a prayer of staying ahead. Before long, whoever was driving that hot machine got right on the wagon's tail.

Desperate now, Price killed his lights and made a screeching, sliding right onto Highway 492. Only in Mississippi, he thought, would such a miserable chunk of asphalt merit the name of highway. But if it let him shake his pursuers, he would bless its undeserved name forevermore.

Only it didn't. The lead pursuer, the hopped-up car that had come zooming out of Philadelphia, also made the turn. Even over the growl of his own car's engine, Cecil Price could hear its brakes screech as it clawed around the corner. Then the pursuer's siren came on and the red light on top of the roof began to flash.

"Jesus! It's that damn deputy again!" Price said. "What am I gonna do?"

"Can we outrun him?" Muhammad Shabazz asked as the beat-up Ford bucketed down the road.

"Not a chance in hell," Price answered. "He's liable to start shooting at us if I don't stop." If he got hit, or if a tire got hit, the car would fly off the road and burst into flames. That was a bad way to go.

"Maybe you better stop," Tariq Abdul-Rashid said.

"Damned if I do and damned if I don't," Cecil Price said bitterly, but his foot had already found the brake pedal. The old blue station wagon slowed, stopped.

The deputy sheriff's car stopped behind it, the same way it had earlier that day. This time, though, the other two cars also stopped. The big black buck of a deputy sheriff got out of his car and strode up to the Ford wagon. "I thought you were going back to Meridian if we let you out of jail."

"We were," Price answered.

"Well, you sure were taking the long way around. Get out of that car," the deputy said. That was the last thing Cecil Price wanted to do. But he thought the deputy would shoot him and the two Black Muslims right there if they refused. Reluctantly, he obeyed. Perhaps even more reluctantly, Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid followed him.

Men were also getting out of the two cars stopped behind the deputy's. Price's heart sank when he saw them. There was the Priest, all right, black as the ace of spades. And there were ten or twelve other Negroes with him. Price recognized some of them as BKV men. He didn't know for sure that the others were, but what else would they be? Some had guns. Others carried crowbars or tire irons or Louisville Sluggers. They all wore rubber gloves so they wouldn't leave fingerprints.

"You don't want to do this," Muhammad Shabazz said earnestly. "I'm telling you the truth—you don't. It won't get you what you think it will."



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"Shut the fuck up, you goddamn raghead race traitor." The deputy sheriff's voice was hard and cold as iron. "You get in the back of my car now, you hear?"

"What will you do to us?" Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.

"Whatever it is, we'll do it right here and right now if you don't shut the fuck up and do like you're told," the deputy answered. "Now stop mouthing off and move, damn you."

Numbly, as if caught in a bad dream, Cecil Price and his companions got into the back of the deputy sheriff's car. A steel grating walled them off from the front seat. Neither back door had a lock or a door handle on the inside. Once you went in there, you stayed in there till somebody decided to let you out.

The deputy slid behind the wheel again. The men from the Black Knights of Voodoo got back into their cars, too. A couple of them aimed weapons at Cecil Price and the Black Muslims before they did. The deputy sheriff waved the BKV men away. "Not quite time yet," he told them.

"This won't help you. The country won't be proud of you. They'll go after you like you wouldn't believe," Muhammad Shabazz said. "If you hurt us, you help our side, and that's nothing but the truth."

"I don't want to listen to your bullshit, you buckra-lovin' raghead, and *that's* nothin' but the truth," the deputy said. "So maybe you just better shut the fuck up."

"Why? What difference does it make now?" the Black Muslim asked.

Instead of answering, the deputy sheriff put the car in gear. He made a Y-turn—the road was too narrow for a U—and swung back around the cars full of BKV men. Then he hit the brakes to wait while they turned around, too. *Good cooperation in a bad cause*, Cecil Price thought. If RACE members worked together as smoothly as these BKV bastards . . .

"All right," the deputy muttered, and the black-and-white moved forward again. Now that he wasn't chasing people at top speed, the deputy sheriff acted like a careful driver. He flicked the turn signal before making a left back onto Highway 19. *Click! Click! Click!* The sound seemed very loud inside the passenger compartment. What went through Price's mind was, *Measuring off the seconds left in my life.*

As soon as the deputy finished the turn, of course, the clicking stopped. Price wished his mind had been going in some other direction a moment before. The deputy drove toward Philadelphia for a minute or two, then used the turn signal again. *Click! Click! Click!* Cecil Price cherished and dreaded the sound of those passing seconds, both at the same time. He grimaced when the deputy finished the new left turn and the indicator fell silent again.

"Where the hell are we?" Muhammad Shabazz muttered.

Before Price could answer him, the deputy did: "This here is Rock Cut Road. Ain't hardly anything around these parts. That's how come we're here."

"Oh, shit," Tariq Abdul-Rashid said. Price couldn't have put it better himself.

The deputy wasn't kidding. Looking out the car's dirty windows, Price



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saw nothing but a narrow red dirt road and weed-filled fields to either side. Behind the black-and-white, car doors slammed as the Black Knights of Voodoo got out and advanced.

"I'm gonna open the door and let y'all out now," the deputy said. "You don't want to do anything stupid, you hear?"

"What the hell difference does it make at this stage of things?" Tariq Abdul-Rashid asked.

"Well, some things are gonna happen. They're gonna, and I don't reckon anything'll change that," the deputy sheriff said seriously. "But they can happen easy, you might say, or they can happen not so easy. You won't like it if they happen not so easy. Believe you me, you won't, not even a little bit."

He got out of the car. *Can we jump him when he opens the door?* Price wondered. He shook his head. Not a chance in church. Not a chance in hell.

One more *click!*: the door opening. Heart racing a mile a minute, legs feather-light with fear, Cecil Price got out of the Neshoba County Sheriff's Department car. The dirt scraped and crunched under the soles of his shoes. *Is that the last thing I'll ever feel?* It didn't seem like enough.

Two Black Knights of Voodoo grabbed Tariq Abdul-Rashid. Two others seized Muhammad Shabazz, and two more laid hold of Cecil Price. Another BKV man walked up to Tariq Abdul-Rashid, pistol in hand. The headlights of the cars behind the black-and-white picked out the globe and anchor tattooed on his right bicep.

"Go get 'em, Wayne," somebody said in a low, hoarse voice—the Priest, Cecil Price saw.

"I will, goddammit. I will," answered the BKV man with the pistol. Price happened to know that Wayne Roberts, in spite of the tattoo, had been dishonorably discharged from the Marine Corps. In the Black Knights of Voodoo, though, he could be a big man.

He scowled at Tariq Abdul-Rashid. "No," the Black Muslim whispered. "Please, no."

"Fuck you, man," Roberts said. "You ain't nothin' but a stinkin' buckra in a black skin." He thumbed back the revolver's hammer and pulled the trigger.

The roar was amazingly loud. The bullet, from point-blank range, caught Tariq Abdul-Rashid in the middle of the forehead. He went limp all at once, as if his bones had turned to water. "Way to go, Wayne!" said one of the men who held him. When his captors let go, he flopped down like a sack of beans, dead before he hit the ground.

"You see?" the black deputy said. "Hard or easy. That there was pretty goddamn easy, wasn't it?"

The BKV men who had hold of Muhammad Shabazz dragged him forward. Even as they did, he was trying to talk sense to them. "I understand how you feel, but this won't help you," he said in a calm, reasonable voice. "Killing us won't do anything for your cause. You—"

"Shut up, asshole." Wayne Roberts cuffed him across the face. "You bet this'll do us some good. We'll be rid of *you*, won't we? Good riddance to bad rubbish." He shot Muhammad Shabazz the same way he'd killed the other Black Muslim.



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"Easy as can be," the deputy sheriff said. "Easier'n he deserved, I reckon. Fucker never knew what hit him." The hot, wet air was thick with the stinks of smokeless powder, of blood, of shit, of fear, of rage.

Easy or not, Cecil Price didn't want to die. With a sudden shout that even startled him, he broke loose from the men who had hold of him. Shouting—screaming—he ran like a madman down Rock Cut Road.

He didn't get more than forty or fifty feet before the first bullet slammed into his back. Next thing he knew, he was lying on his face, dirt in his mouth, more dirt in his nose. Something horrible was happening inside him. He felt on fire, only worse. When he tried to get up, he couldn't.

Big as a mountain, hard as a mountain, the deputy sheriff loomed over him. "All right, white boy," he ground out. "You coulda had it easy, same as your asshole buddies. Now we're gonna do it the hard way." He crouched down beside Price, grabbed his right arm, and broke it over his thigh like a broomstick. The sound the bones made when they snapped was just about like a breaking broomstick, too. The sound Cecil Price made . . . How the BKV men laughed!

With a grunt, the sheriff got to his feet. With the arrogant strut he always used, he walked around to Price's left side. With the coldblooded deliberation he'd shown before, he broke the white man's left arm. Price barely had room inside his head for any new torment.

Or so he thought, till one of the Black Knights of Voodoo kicked him in the crotch. "Ain't gonna mess with no black women now, are you, buckra?" he jeered. More boots thudded into Price's balls. That almost made him forget about his ruined arms. It *almost* made him forget about the bullet in his back, except he couldn't find breath enough to scream the way he wanted to.

After an eternity that probably lasted three or four minutes, the deputy sheriff said, "Reckon that's enough now. Let's finish him off and get rid of the bodies."

"I'll take care of it. Bet your sweet ass I will," Wayne Roberts said. He fired at Price again, and then again. Another gun barked, too, maybe once, maybe twice. By that time, Price had stopped paying close attention.

But he didn't fall straight into sweet blackness, the way Muhammad Shabazz and Tariq Abdul-Rashid had. He lingered in red torment when the BKV men picked him up and stuffed him into the trunk of one of their cars along with the Black Muslims' bodies.

The car jounced down the dirt road, every pothole and every rock a fresh stab of agony. At last, it stopped. "Here we go," somebody said as a Black Knight of Voodoo opened the trunk. "This ought to do the job."

"Oh, fuck, yes," somebody else said. Eager gloved hands hauled Cecil Price out of the trunk, and then the corpses of his friends.

"Hell, this dam'll hold a hundred of them." That was the deputy sheriff, sounding in charge of things as usual. "Go on, throw 'em in there, and we'll cover 'em up. Nobody'll ever find the sons of bitches."

*Thump!* That was one of the Black Muslims, going into a hollow in the ground. *Thump!* That was the other one. And *thump!* That was Cecil



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Price, landing on top of Tariq Abdul-Rashid and Muhammad Shabazz. An Everest of pain in what were already the Himalayas.

"Fire up the dozer," the deputy said. "Let's bury 'em and get on back to town. We done us a good night's work here, by God."

Somebody climbed up onto the bulldozer's seat. The big yellow Caterpillar D-4 belched and farted to life. It bit out a great chunk of dirt and, motor growling, poured it over the two Black Muslims and Cecil Price. Price struggled hopelessly to breathe. More dirt thudded down on him, more and more.

*Buried alive!* he thought. *Sweet Jesus help me, I'm buried alive!* But not for long. The last thing he knew was the taste of earth filling his mouth.

He woke in darkness, not knowing who he was. The taste of earth seemed to fill his mouth.

He sat bolt upright, gasping for breath, heart sledgehammering in his chest as if he'd run a hundred miles. He looked around wildly. Tiny stripes of pale moonlight slipped between the slats of the Venetian blinds and stretched across the bedroom floor.

Beside him on the cheap, lumpy mattress, someone stirred: his wife. "You all right, Cecil?" she muttered drowsily.

A name! He had a name! He was Cecil, Cecil Price, Cecil Ray Price. Was he all right? That was a different question, a harder question. "I guess . . . I guess maybe I am," he said, wonder in his voice.

"Then settle down and go on back to sleep. *I* aim to, if you give me half a chance," his wife said. "What ails you, anyhow?"

"Bad dream," he answered, the way he always did. He'd never said a word about what kind of bad dream it was. Somehow, he didn't think he *could* say a word about what kind of bad dream it was. He'd tried two or three times, always with exactly zero luck. The words wouldn't form. The ideas behind the words wouldn't form, not so he could talk about them. But even if he couldn't, he knew what the dreams were all about. Oh, yes. He knew.

He still lived in the same brown clapboard house he'd lived in on that hot summer night in 1964, the brown clapboard house he'd lived in for going on forty years. It wasn't more than a block away from Philadelphia's town square.

He'd been Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price then. He ran for sheriff in '67, when Larry Rainey didn't go for another term, but another Klansman beat him out. Then he spent four years away, and after that he couldn't very well be a lawman any more. Once he came back to Mississippi, he worked as a surveyor. He drove a truck for an oil company. And he wound up a jeweler and watchmaker—he'd always been good with his hands. He turned into a big wheel among Mississippi Shriners.

But the dreams never went away. If he hadn't seen that damn Ford station wagon that afternoon . . . He had, though, and what happened next followed as inexorably as night followed day. Two Yankee busybodies: Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman. One uppity local nigger: James Chaney.



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At the time, getting rid of them seemed the only sensible thing to do. He took care of it, with plenty of help from the Ku Klux Klan.

He wondered if the others, the ones who were still alive, had dreams like his. He'd tried to ask a couple of times, but he couldn't, any more than he could talk about his own. Maybe they'd tried to ask him, too. If they had, they hadn't had any luck, either.

Dreams. His started even before the damn informer tipped off the FBI about where the bodies were buried. At first, he figured they were just nerves. Who wouldn't have a case of the jitters after what he went through, when the whole country was trying to pull Neshoba County down around his ears?

Well, the whole country damn well did it. Back in June 1964, who would have dreamt a Mississippi jury—a jury of Mississippi white men—would, could, convict anybody for violating the civil rights of a coon and a couple of Jews? But the jury damn well did that, too. Price got six years, and served four of them in a Federal prison in Minnesota before they turned him loose for good behavior.

He went on having the dreams up there.

Sometimes weeks went by when they let him alone, and he would wonder if he was free. And he would always hope he was, and he never would be. It was as if hoping he were free was enough all by itself for . . . something to show him he wasn't.

Did the dreams make him change? Did they just make him pretend to change? Even he couldn't say for sure. Ten years after he got convicted, he told a reporter—a New York City reporter, no less—he'd seen *Roots* and liked it. When he talked about integration, he said that was how things were going to be and that was all there was to it.

He spent years rebuilding his name, rebuilding his reputation. And then, in 1999, everything fell to pieces again. He got convicted of another felony. No guns this time, no cars racing down the highway in the heat of the night: he sold certifications for commercial driver's licensing without doing the testing he should have. A cheap little money-making scheme—except he got caught.

They didn't jug him that time. He drew three years' probation. But you could stay a hero—to some people—for doing what you thought you had to do to people who were trying to change the way of life you'd known since you were born. When you got busted for selling bogus certifications, you weren't a hero to anybody, even yourself. You were just a lousy little crook.

A lousy little crook with . . . dreams.

Two years later, a season after the turn of the century, he climbed up on a lift at an equipment-rental place in Philadelphia. He fell off somehow, and landed on his head. He died three days later at a hospital in Jackson—the same hospital where he'd brought the bodies of Schwerner and Goodman and Chaney for autopsy thirty-seven years earlier, after the FBI tore up the dam to get them out. He never knew that, but then, neither had they.

He woke in darkness, not knowing who he was. The taste of earth filled his mouth. O



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**Neal Asher wrote seven novels and fifty short stories and articles before he sold his first book. He tells us the writing life is still a good deal better than previous jobs, such as "cutting grass conspicuously visited by dogs, delivering coal, digging holes, or long dismal days operating machine tools." Neal's new story is a tale of unrelenting and terrifying excitement. In it, the hunter and the hunted become interchangeable while all along they seem deaf to why . . .**

# SOFTLY SPOKE THE GABBLEDUCK

Neal Asher

Lost in some perverse fantasy, Tameera lovingly inspected the displays of her Optek rifle. For me, what happened next proceeded with the unstoppable nightmare slowness of an accident. She brought the butt of the rifle up to her shoulder, took careful aim, and squeezed off a single shot. One of the sheq slammed back against a rock face, then tumbled down through vegetation to land in the white water of a stream.

Some creatures seem to attain the status of myth even though proven to be little different from other apparently prosaic species. On Earth, the lion contends with the unicorn, the wise old elephant never forgets, and gentle whales sing haunting ballads in the deeps. It stems from anthropomorphism, is fed by both truth and lies, and, over time, firmly imbeds itself in human culture. On Myral, where I had spent the last ten years, only a little of such status attached to the largest autochthon—not surprising for a creature whose name is a contraction of "shit-eating quadruped." But rumors of something else in the wilderness, something that had no right to be there, had really set the myth-engines of the human mind into motion, and brought hunters to this world.

There was no sign of any sheq on the way out over the narrow vegetation-



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cloaked mounts. They only put in an appearance after I finally moored my blimp to a peak, above a horizontal slab on which blister tents could be pitched. My passengers noticed straight away that the slab had been used many times before, and that my mooring was an iron ring long set into the rock, but then, campsites were a rarity amid the steep slopes, cliffs, and streams of this area. It wasn't a place humans were built for. Sheq country.

Soon after he disembarked, Tholan went over to the edge to try out one of his disposable vidcams. The cam itself was about the size of his forefinger, and he was pointing it out over the terrain while inspecting a palm com he held in his other hand. He had unloaded a whole case of these cams, which he intended to position in likely locations, or dangle into mist pockets on a line—a hunter's additional eyes. He called me over. Tameera and Anders followed.

"There." He nodded downward.

A seven of sheq was making its way across the impossible terrain—finding handholds amid the lush vertical vegetation and traveling with the assurance of spiders on a wall. They were disconcertingly simian, about the size of a man, and quadrupedal—each limb jointed like a human arm, but ending in hands bearing eight long prehensile fingers. Their heads, though, were anything but simian, being small, insectile, like the head of a mosquito, but with two wide trumpet-like proboscises.

"They won't be a problem, will they?" Tholan's sister, Tameera, asked.

She was the most xenophobic, I'd decided, but then, such phobia made little difference to their sport: the aliens they sought out usually being the "I'm gonna chew off the top of your head and suck out your brains" variety.

"No—so long as we leave them alone," said Tholan. Using his thumb on the side controls of his palm com, he increased the camera's magnification, switching it to infrared, then ultrasound imaging.

"I didn't load anything," said Anders, Tholan's PA. "Are they herbivores?"

"Omnivores," I told her. "They eat some of that vegetation you see and supplement their diet with rock conch and octupal."

"Rock conch and octupal indeed," said Anders.

I pointed to the conch-like molluscs clinging to the wide leaves below the slab.

Anders nodded, then said, "Octupal?"

"Like it sounds: something like an octopus, lives in pools, but can drag itself overland when required." I glanced at Tameera and added, "None of them bigger than your hand."

I hadn't fathomed this trio yet. Brother and sister hunted together, relied on each other, yet seemed to hate each other. Anders, who I at first thought Tholan was screwing, really did just organize things for him. Perhaps I should have figured them out before agreeing to being hired, then Tameera would never have taken the shot she then took.

The hot chemical smell from the rifle filled the unbreathable air. I guessed they used primitive projectile weapons of this kind to make their



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hunts more sporting. I didn't know how to react. Tholan stepped forward and pushed down the barrel of her weapon before she could kill another of the creatures.

"That was stupid," he said.

"Do they frighten you?" she asked coquettishly.

I reached up and checked that my throat plug was still in place, for I felt breathless, but it was still bleeding oxygen into my bronchus. To say that I now had a bad feeling about all this would have been an understatement.

"You know that as well as putting us all in danger, she just committed a crime," I said conversationally, as Tholan stepped away from his sister.

"Crime?" he asked.

"She just killed a C-grade sentient. If the Warden AI finds out and can prove she knew before she pulled the trigger, then she's dead. But that's not the main problem now." I eyed the sheq seven, now six. They seemed to be confused about the cause of their loss. "Hopefully they won't attack, but it'll be an idea to keep watch."

He stared at me, shoved his cam into his pocket. I turned away and headed back. Why had I agreed to bring these bored aristos out here to hunt for Myral's mythic gabbleduck? Money. Those who have enough to live comfortably greatly underestimate it as a source of motivation. Tholan was paying enough for me to pay off all I owed on my blimp, and prevent a particular shark from paying me a visit to collect interest by way of involuntarily donated organs. It would also be enough for me to upgrade my apartment in the citadel, so I could rent it while I went out to look at this world. I'd had many of the available cerebral loads and knew much about Myral's environment, but that wasn't the same as experiencing it. There was still much for me to learn, to know. Though I was certain that the chances of my finding a gabbleduck—a creature from a planet light-centuries away—anywhere on Myral, were lower than the sole of my boot.

"She only did that to get attention," said Anders at my shoulder.

"Well, let's hope she didn't succeed too well!" I replied. I looked up at my blimp, and considered the prospect of escaping this trio and bedding down for the night. Certainly we would be getting nothing more done today, what with the blue giant sun gnawing the edge of the world as it went down.

"You have to excuse her. She's over-compensating for a father who ignored her for the first twenty years of her life."

Anders had been coming on to me right from the start and I wondered just what sort of rich bitch game she was playing, though to find out, I would have to let my guard down, and that I had no intention of doing. She was too much: too attractive, too intelligent, and just being in her presence set things jumping around in my stomach. She would destroy me.

"I don't have to excuse her," I said. "I just have to tolerate her."

With that, I headed to the alloy ladder extending down from the blimp cabin.

"Why are they called shit-eaters?" she asked, falling into step beside me. Obviously she'd heard where the name sheq came from.



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"As well as the rock conch and octupal, they eat each other's shit—running it through a second intestinal tract."

She winced.

I added, "But it's not something they should die for."

"You're not going to report this are you?" she asked.

"How can I?—he didn't want me carrying traceable com."

I tried not to let my anxiety show. Tholan didn't want any of Myral's AIs finding out what he was up to, so, as a result, he'd provided all our com equipment, and it was encoded. I was beginning to wonder if that might be unhealthy for me.

"You're telling me you have no communicator up there?" She pointed up at the blimp.

"I won't report it," I said, then climbed, wishing I could get away with pulling the ladder up behind me, wishing I had not stuck so rigidly to the wording of the contract.

Midark is that time when it's utterly black on Myral, when the sun is precisely on the opposite side of the world from you. It comes after five hours of blue, lasts about three hours prior to the next five hours of blue—the twilight that is neither day nor night and is caused by reflection of sunlight from the sub-orbital dust cloud. Anyway, it was at midark when the screaming and firing woke me. By the time I had reattached my oxygen bottle and was clambering down the ladder, some floods were lighting the area and it was all over.

"Yes, you warned me," Tholan spat.

I walked over to Tameera's tent, which was ripped open and empty. There was no blood, but then the sheq would not want to damage the replacement. I glanced at Anders, who was inspecting a palm com.

"She's alive." She looked up. "She must have been using her own oxygen supply rather than the tent's. We have to go after her now."

"Claw frames in midark?" I asked.

"We've got night specs." She looked at me as if she hadn't realized until then how stupid I was.

"I don't care if you've got owl and cat genes—it's suicide."

"Do explain," said Tholan nastily.

"You got me out here as your guide. The plan was to set up a base and from it survey the area for any signs of the gabbleduck—by claw frame."

"Yes . . ."

"Well, claw frames are only safe here during the day."

"I thought you were going to explain."

"I am." I reached out, detached one of the floods from its narrow post, and walked with it to the edge of the slab. I shone it down, revealing occasional squirming movement across the cliff of vegetation below.

"Octupals," said Anders. "What's the problem?"

I turned to her and Tholan. "At night they move to new pools, and, being slow-moving, they've developed a defense. Anything big gets too close, and they eject stinging barbs. They won't kill you, but you'll damned well know if you're hit, so unless you've brought armored clothing . . ."

"But what about Tameera?" Anders asked.



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"Oh, the sheq will protect her for a while."

"For a while?" Tholan queried.

"At first, they'll treat her like an infant replacement for the one she killed," I told him. "So they'll guide her hands and catch her if she starts to fall. After a time, they'll start to get bored, because sheq babies learn very quickly. If we don't get to her before tomorrow night's first blue, she'll probably have broken her neck."

"When does this stop?" He nodded toward the octupal activity.

"Mid-blue."

"We go then."

The claw frame is a sporting development from military exoskeletons. The frame itself braces your body. A spine column rests against your back like a metal flatworm. Metal bones from this extend down your legs and along your arms. The claws are four times the size of human hands, and splayed out like big spiders from behind them, and from behind the ankles. Each finger is a piton, and programmed to seek out crevices on the rock face you are climbing. The whole thing is stronger, faster, and more sensitive than a human being. If you want, it can do all the work for you. Alternatively, it can just be set in neutral, the claws folded back, while you do all the climbing yourself—the frame only activating to save your life. Both Anders and Tholan, I noted, set theirs to about a third-assist, which is where I set mine. Blister tents and equipment in their backpacks, and oxygen bottles and catalyzers at their waists, they went over the edge ahead of me. Tameera's claw frame scrambled after them—a glittery skeleton—slaved to them. I glanced back at my blimp and wondered if I should just turn round and go back to it. I went over the edge.

With the light intensity increasing and the octupals bubbling down in their pools, we made good time. Later, though, when we had to go lower to keep on course after the sheq, things got a bit more difficult. Despite the three of us being on third-assist we were panting within a few hours, as lower down, there was less climbing and more pushing through tangled vegetation. I noted that my catalyzer pack was having trouble keeping up—cracking the $CO_2$ atmosphere and topping up the two flat body-form bottles at my waist.

"She's eight kilometers away," Anders suddenly said. "We'll not reach her at this rate."

"Go two-thirds assist," said Tholan.

We all did that, and soon our claw frames were moving faster through the vegetation and across the rock-faces than was humanly possible. It made me feel lazy—like I was just a sack of flesh hanging on the hard-working claw frame. But we covered those eight kilometers quickly, and, as the sun breached the horizon, glimpsed the sheq far ahead of us, scrambling up from the sudden shadows in the valleys. They were a seven again now, I saw: Tameera being assisted along by creatures that had snatched the killer of one of their own, mistaking her for sheq herself.

"Why do they do it?" Anders asked as we scrambled along a vertical face.

"Do what?"



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"Snatch people to make up their sevens."

"Three reasons I've heard: optimum number for survival, or seven sheq required for successful mating, or the start of a primitive religion."

"Which do you believe it is?"

"Probably a bit of them all."

As we drew closer, I could hear Tameera sobbing in terror, pure fatigue, and self-pity. The six sheq were close around her, nudging her along, catching her feet when they slipped, grabbing her hands and placing them in firmer holds. I could also see that her dark green slicksuit was spattered with a glutinous yellow substance, and felt my gorge rising at what else she had suffered. They had tried to feed her.

We halted about twenty meters behind on a seventy-degree slope and watched as Tameera was badgered toward where it tilted upright, then past the vertical.

"How do we play this?" Tholan asked.

"We have to get to her before they start negotiating that." I pointed at the lethal terrain beyond the sheq. "One mistake there and . . ." I gestured below to tilted slabs jutting from undergrowth, half hidden under fog generated by a nearby waterfall. I didn't add that we probably wouldn't even be able to find the body, despite the tracker Tameera evidently wore. "We'll have to run a line to her. Anders can act as the anchor. She'll have to make her way above, and it's probably best if she takes Tameera's claw frame with her. You'll go down slope to grab Tameera if anything goes wrong and she falls. I'll go in with the line and the harness."

"You've done this before?" Anders asked.

"Have you?" I countered.

"Seems you know how to go about it," Tholan added.

"Just uploads from the planetary almanac."

"Okay, we'll do it like you said," Tholan agreed.

I'd noticed that all three of them carried fancy monofilament climbing winders on their belts. Anders set hers unwinding its line, which looked thick as rope with cladding applied to the monofilament on its way out. I took up the ring end of the line and attached the webbing harness Tholan took from one of his pack's many pockets.

"Set?" I asked.

They both nodded, Tholan heading downslope and Anders up above. Now, all I had to do was get to Tameera through the sheq and get her into the harness.

As I drew closer, the creatures began to notice me and those insectile heads swung toward me, proboscises pulsating as if they were sniffing.

"Tameera . . . Tameera!"

She jerked her head up, yellow gunk all around her mouth and spattered across her face. "Help me!"

"I've got a line here and a harness," I told her, but I wasn't sure if she understood.

I was about three meters away when the sheq that had been placing her foot on a thick root growing across the face of stone abruptly spun and scrambled toward me. Tholan's Optek crashed and I saw the explosive exit wound open in the creature's jade green torso—a flower of yel-



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low and pink. It sighed, sagged, but did not fall—its eight-fingered hands tangled in verdancy. The other sheq dived for safer holds and pulled close to the rock face.

"What the fuck!"

"Just get the harness on her!" Tholan bellowed.

I moved in quickly, not so much because he ordered it, but because I didn't want him blowing away more of the creatures. Tameera was at first lethargic, but then she began to get the idea. Harness on, I moved aside.

"Anders!"

Anders had obviously seen, because she drew the line taut through greenery and began hauling Tameera upward, away from sheq who were now beginning to nose in confusion toward their second dead member. Stripped-off line cladding fell like orange snow. I reached out, shoved the dead sheq, once, twice, and it tumbled down the slope, the rest quickly scrambling after it. Tholan was moving aside, looking up at me. I gestured to a nearby mount with a flat top on which we could all gather.

"Got her!" Anders called.

Glancing up, I saw Anders installing Tameera in the other claw frame. "Over there!" I gestured to the mount. Within a few minutes, we were all on the small area of level stone, gazing down toward where the five remaining sheq had caught their companion, realized it was dead, and released it again, and were now zipping about like wasps disturbed from a nest.

"We should head back to the blimp, fast as you like."

No one replied, because Tameera chose that moment to vomit noisily. The stench was worse even than that from the glutinous yellow stuff all over her.

"What?" said Anders.

"They fed her," I explained.

That made Anders look just as sick.

Finally sitting up, then detaching her arms from her claw frame, Tameera stared at her brother and held out her hand. He unhitched his pack, drew out her Optek rifle and handed it over. She fired from that sitting position, bowling one of the sheq down the distant slope and the subsequent vertical drop.

"Look, you can't—"

The barrel of Tholan's Optek was pointing straight at my forehead.

"We can," he said.

I kept my mouth shut as, one by one, Tameera picked off the remaining sheq and sent them tumbling down into the mist-shrouded river canyon. It was only then that we returned to the slab campsite.

Blue again, but I was certainly ready for sleep, and felt a surge of resentment when the blimp cabin began shaking. Someone was coming up the ladder, then walking round the catwalk. Shortly, Anders opened the airtight door and hauled herself inside. I saw her noting with some surprise how the passenger cabin converted into living quarters. I was ensconced in the cockpit chair, sipping a glass of whisky, feet up on the console. She turned off her oxygen supply, tried the air in the cabin, then sat down on the corner of the fold-down bed, facing me.



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"Does it disgust you?" she asked.

I shrugged. Tried to stay nonchalant. What was happening below didn't bother me, her presence in my cabin did.

She continued, "There's no reason to be disgusted. Incest no longer has the consequences it once had. All genetic faults can be corrected in the womb. . . ."

"Did I say I was disgusted? Perhaps it's you, why else are you up here?"

She grimaced. "Well, they do get noisy."

"I'm sure it won't last much longer," I said. "Then you can return to your tent."

"You're not very warm, are you?"

"Just wary—I know the kind of games you people play."

"You people?"

"The bored and the wealthy."

"I'm Tholan's PA. I'm an employee."

I sat there feeling all resentful, my resentment increased because, of course, she was right. I should not have lumped her in the same category as Tholan and his sister. She was, in fact, in my category. She had also casually just knocked away one of my defenses.

"Would you like a drink?" I eventually asked, my mouth dry.

Now I expected her righteous indignation and rejection. But Anders was more mature than that, more dangerous.

"Yes, I would." As she said it, she undid the stick seams of her boots and kicked them off. Then she detached the air hose from her throat plug, coiled it back to the bottle, then unhooked that from her belt and put it on the floor. I hauled myself from my chair and poured her a whisky, adding ice from my recently installed little fridge.

"Very neat," she said, accepting the drink. As I made to step past her and return to the cockpit chair, she caught hold of my forearm and pulled me down beside her.

"You know," I said, "that if we don't report what happened today, that would make us accessories. That could mean readjustment, even mindwipe."

"Are you hetero?" she asked.

I nodded. She put her hand against my chest and pushed me back on to the bed. I let her do it—laid back. She stood up, looking down at me as she drained her whisky. Then she undid her trousers, dropped them and kicked them away, then climbed astride me still wearing her shirt and very small briefs. Still staring at me she undid my trousers, freed my erection, then pulling aside the crotch of her briefs, slowly slid down onto me. Then she began to grind back and forth.

"Just come," she said, when she saw my expression. "You've got all night to return the favor." I managed to hold on for about another thirty seconds. It had been a while. Afterward, we stripped naked, and I did return the favor. And then we spent most of the blue doing things to each other normally reserved for those for whom straight sex had become a source of ennui.

"You know, Tholan will pay a great deal for your silence, one way or another."



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I understood that Tholan might not pay *me* for my silence. I thought her telling me this worthy of the punishment I then administered, and which she noisily enjoyed, muffling her face in the pillow.

We slept a sleep of exhaustion through midark.

Tameera wanted trophies. She wanted a pair of sheq heads to cunningly preserve and mount on the gateposts on either side of the drive to her and Tholan's property on Earth. Toward the end of morning blue, we ate recon rations and prepared to set out. I thought it pointless to tell them of the penalties for possessing trophies from class C sentients. They'd already stepped so far over the line that it was a comparatively minor crime.

"What we need to discuss is my fee," I said.

"Seems to me he's already had some payment," said Tameera, eyeing Anders.

Tholan shot her a look of annoyance and turned back to me. "Ten times what I first offered. No one needs to know."

"Any items you bring back you'll carry in your stuff," I said.

I wondered at their arrogance. Maybe they'd get away with it—we'd know soon enough upon our return to the citadel—but most likely, a drone had tagged one of the sheq, and, as the creature died, a satellite eye had recorded the event. The way I saw it, I could claim to have been scared they would kill me, and only keeping up the criminal façade until we reached safety. Of course, if they did get away with what they'd done, there was no reason why I shouldn't benefit.

While we prepared, I checked the map in my palm com, input our position, and worked out an easier course than the one we had taken the day before. The device would keep us on course despite the fact that Tholan had allowed no satellite link-up. By the sun, by its own elevation, the time, and by reading the field strength of Myral's magnetosphere, the device kept itself accurately located on the map I'd loaded from the planetary almanac.

We went over the edge as the octupals slurped and splashed in their pools and the sun flung arc-welder light across the land. This time, we took it easy on third assist, also stopping for meals and rest. During one of these breaks, I demonstrated how to use a portable stove to broil a rock conch in its shell, but Tholan was the only one prepared to sample the meat. I guess it was a man thing. As we traveled, I pointed out flowering spider vines, their electric-red male flowers taking to the air in search of the blowsy yellow female flowers: these plants and their pollinating insects having moved beyond the symbiosis seen on Earth to become one. Then, the domed heads of octupals rising out of small rock pools to blink bulbous gelatinous eyes at the evening blue, we moored our blister tents on a forty-degree slope.

Anders connected my tent to hers, while a few meters away Tholan and Tameera connected their tents. No doubt they joined their sleeping bags in the same way we did. Sex, in a tent fixed to such a slope, with a sleeping bag also moored to the rock through the ground sheet, was a bit cramped. But it was enjoyable and helped to pass most of the long night.



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Sometime during midark I came half awake to the sound of a voice. "Slabber gebble-crab," and "speg bruglor nomp," were its nonsensical utterances. The yelling and groaning from Tholan, in morning blue, I thought due to his and his sister's lovemaking. But in full morning I had to pick octupal stings from the fabric of my tent, and I saw that Tholan wore a dressing on his cheek.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I just stuck my damned head out," he replied.

"What treatment have you used?"

"Unibiotic and antallergens."

"That should do it."

Shame I didn't think to ask why he wanted to leave his tent and go creeping about in the night. That I attributed the strange voice in midark to a dream influenced things neither one way nor the other.

It was only a few hours into the new day that we reached the flat-topped mount from which Tameera had slaughtered the remaining sheq. I studied the terrain through my monocular and realized how the excitement of our previous visit here had blinded me to just how dangerous this area was. There wasn't a slope that was less than seventy degrees, and many of the river valleys and canyons running between the jagged rocks below were full of rolling mist. Claw frames or not, this was about as bad as it could get.

"Well, that's where they should be," said Tholan, lowering his own monocular and pointing to a wider canyon floored with mist out of which arose the grumble of a river.

"If they haven't been swept away," I noted.

Ignoring me, he continued, "We'll work down from where they fell. Maybe some of them got caught in the foliage."

From the mount, we traveled down, across a low ridge, then up onto the long slope from which we had rescued Tameera. I began to cut down diagonally, and Anders followed me while Tameera and Tholan kept moving along high to where the sheq had been, though why they were going there I had no idea, for we had seen every one fall. Anders was above me when I began to negotiate a whorled hump of stone at the shoulder of a cliff. I thought I could see a sheq caught in some foliage down there. As I was peering through the mist, Anders screamed above me. I had time only to glance up and drive my frame's fingers into stone when she barreled into me. We both went over. Half detached from her frame, she clung around my neck. I looked up to where two fingers of my frame held us suspended. I noted that her frame—the property of Tholan and Tameera—was dead weight. Then I looked higher and guessed why.

Brother and sister were scrambling down toward us, saying nothing, not urging us to hang on. I guessed that was precisely what they did not want us to do. It must have been frustrating for Tholan: the both of us in one tent that could have been cut from its moorings—two witnesses lost in the unfortunate accident—but sting-shooting molluscs preventing him from committing the dirty deed. I reached round with my free claw and tightly gripped Anders's belt, swung my foot claws in and gripped the rock face with them.



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"Get the frame off."

She stared at me in confusion, then looked up the slope, and I think all the facts clicked into place. Quickly, while I supported her, she undid her frame's straps, leaving the chest straps until last. It dropped into the mist: a large chrome harvestman spider . . . a dead one.

"Okay, round onto my back and cling on tightly."

She swung round quickly. Keeping to third-assist—for any higher assistance and the frame might move too fast for her to hang on—I began climbing down the cliff to the mist. The first Optek bullet ricocheted off stone by my face. The second ricochet, by my hand, was immediately followed by an animal grunt from Anders. Something warm began trickling down my neck and her grip loosened.

Under the mist, a river thrashed its way between tilted slabs. I managed to reach one such half-seen slab just before Anders released her hold completely as she fainted. I laid her down and inspected her wound. The ricochet had hit her cheekbone and left a groove running up to her temple. It being a head wound, there was a lot of blood, but it didn't look fatal if I could get her medical attention. But doing anything now with the medical kits we both carried seemed suicidal. I could hear the mutter of Tameera and Tholan's voices from above—distorted by the mist. Then, closer, and lower down by the river, another voice:

"Shabra tabul. Nud lockock ocker," something said.

It was like hiding in the closet from an intruder, only to have something growl right next to you. Stirred by the constant motion of the river, the mist slid through the air in banners, revealing and concealing. On the slab, we were five meters above the graveled riverbank upon which the creature squatted. Its head was level with me. Anders chose that moment to groan and I quickly slapped my hand over her mouth. The creature was pyramidal, all but one of its three pairs of arms folded complacently over the jut of its lower torso. In one huge black claw it held the remains of a sheq. With the fore-talon of another claw, it was levering a trapped bone from the white holly-thorn lining of its duck bill. The tiara of green eyes below its domed skull glittered.

"Brong da bulla," it stated, having freed the bone and flung it away.

It was no consolation to realize that the sheq corpses had attracted the gabbleduck here. Almost without volition, I crouched lower, hoping it did not see me, hoping that if it did, I could make myself appear less appetizing. My hands shaking, I reached down and began taking line off the winder at Anders's belt. The damned machine seemed so noisy and the line far too bright an orange. I got enough to tie around my waist as a precaution. I then undid the straps to her pack, and eased her free of that encumbrance. Now, I could slide her down toward the back of the slab, taking us out of the creature's line of sight, but that would put me in the foliage down there and it would be sure to hear me. I decided to heave her up, throw her over my shoulder, and just get out of there as fast as I could. But just then, a bullet smacked into the column of my claw frame and knocked me down flat, the breath driven out of me.

I rolled over, looking toward the gabbleduck as I did so. I felt my flesh



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creep. It was gone. Something that huge had no right to be able to move so quickly and stealthily. Once on my back, I gazed up at Tholan and his sister as they came down the cliff. My claw frame was heavy and dead, and so too would I be, but whether by bullet or chewed up in that nightmare bill was debatable.

The two halted a few meters above, and, with their claw frames gripping backward against the rock, freed their arms so they could leisurely take aim with their Opteks. Then something sailed out of the mist and slammed into the cliff just above Tameera, and dropped down. She started screaming, intestines and bleeding flesh caught between her and the cliff—the half-chewed corpse of a sheq. The gabbleduck loomed out of the mist on the opposite side of the slab from where it had disappeared, stretched up and up and extended an arm that had to be three meters long. One scything claw knocked Tameera's Optek spinning away and made a sound like a knife across porcelain as it scraped stone. On full automatic, Tholan fired his weapon into the body of the gabbleduck, the bullets thwacking away with seemingly no effect. I grabbed Anders and rolled with her to the side of the slab, not caring where we dropped. We fell through foliage and tangled growth, down into a crevasse where we jammed until I undid my frame straps and shed my pack ahead of us.

"Shabber grubber shabber!" the gabbleduck bellowed accusingly.

"Oh god oh god oh god!" Tameera.

More firing from Tholan.

"Gurble," tauntingly.

"I'll be back for you, fucker!"

I don't know if he was shouting at the gabbleduck or me.

There was water in the lower part of the crevasse—more than enough to fill my purifying bottle and to clean the blood from Anders' wound before dressing it. I used a small medkit diagnosticer on her and injected the drugs it manufactured in response to her injuries. Immediately, her breathing eased and her color returned. But we were not in a good position. The gabbleduck was moving about above us, occasionally making introspective and nonsensical comments on the situation. A little later, when I was trying to find some way to set up the blister tent, a dark shape occluded the sky above.

"Urbock shabber goh?" the gabbleduck enquired, then, not being satisfied with my lack of response, groped down into the crevasse. It could reach only as far as the ridge where my claw frame was jammed. With a kind of thoughtful impatience, it tapped a fore-talon against the stone, then withdrew its arm.

"Gurble," it decided, and moved away.

Apparently, linguists who have loaded a thousand languages into their minds despair trying to understand gabbleducks. What they say is nonsensical, but frustratingly close to meaning. There's no reason for them to have such complex voice boxes, especially to communicate with each other, as on the whole they are solitary creatures and speak to themselves. When they meet it is usually only to mate or fight, or both. There's also no reason for them to carry structures in their skulls capable of handling



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vastly complex languages. Two-thirds of their large brains they seem to use hardly at all. Science, in their case, often supports myth.

Driving screw pitons into either side of the crevasse, I was eventually able to moor the tent across. Like a hammock, the tough material of the groundsheet easily supported our weight, even with all the contortions I had to go through to get Anders into the sleeping bag. Once she was safely ensconced, I found that evening blue had arrived. Using a torch, I explored the crevasse, finding how it rose to the surface at either end. Then the danger from octupals, stirring in the sump at the crevasse bottom, forced me back to the tent. The following night was not good. A veritable swarm of octupals swamping the tent had me worrying that their extra weight would bring it down. It was also very very dark, down there under the mist. Morning took forever to arrive, but when it eventually did, Anders regained consciousness.

"They tried to kill us," she said, after lubricating her mouth with purified water.

"They certainly did."

"Where are we now?"

"In a hole." She stared at me and I went on to explain the situation.

"So how do we get out of this?" she eventually asked.

"We've both lost our claw frames, but at least we've retained our oxygen bottles and catalyzers. I wish I'd told Tholan to screw his untraceable com bullshit." I thought for a moment. "What about your palm com? Could we use it to signal?"

"It's his, just like the claw frame I was using. He'll have shut it down by now. Should we be able to get to it." She looked up. Her backpack was up there on the slab, up there with the gabbleduck.

"Ah."

She peered at me. "You're saying you really have no way of communicating with the citadel?"

"Not even on my blimp. You saw my contract with Tholan. I didn't risk carrying anything, as he seems the type to refuse payment for any infringements."

"So what now?" she asked.

"That rather depends on Tholan and Tameera . . . and on you."

"Me?"

"I'm supposing that, as a valued employee, you too have one of these implants?" Abruptly she got a sick expression. I went on, "My guess is that those two shits have gone for my blimp to bring it back here. If we stay in one place, they'll zero in on your implant. If we move they'll still be able to track us. We'll have to stay down low under the mist and hope they don't get any lucky shots in. The trouble is that to our friend down here we would be little more than an entrée."

"You could leave me—make your own way back. Once out of this area they'd have trouble finding you."

"It had to be said," I agreed. "Now let's get back to how we're going to get out of here."

* * *



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After we had repacked the blister tent and sleeping bag, we moved to the end of the crevasse, which, though narrow, gave easier access to the surface. Slanting down one way, to the graveled banks of the river, was another slab, bare and slippery. Above us was the edge of the slab we had rolled from, and, behind that, disappearing into mist, rose the wall of stone I had earlier descended. Seeing this brought home to me just how deep was the shit trap we occupied. The citadel was just over two hundred kilometers away. I estimated our travel rate at being not much more than a few kilometers a day. The journey was survivable. The Almanac loadings I'd had told me what we could eat, and there would never be any shortage of water. Just so long as our catalyzers held out and neither of us fell. . . .

"We'll run that line of yours between us, about four meters to give us room to maneuver. I'll take point."

"You think it's safe to come out?" Anders asked.

"Not really, but it's not safe to stay here, either."

Anders ran the line out from her winder and locked it, and I attached its end ring to a loop on the back of my belt before working my way up to the edge of the slab. Once I hauled myself up, I was glad to see her pack still where I had abandoned it. I was also glad that Anders did not require my help to climb up—if I had to help her all the way, the prospective journey time would double. Anders shrugged on her pack, cinched the stomach strap. We then made our way to where vegetation grew like a vertical forest up the face of the cliff. Before we attempted to enter this, I took out my palm com and worked out the best route—one taking us back toward the citadel, yet keeping us under the mist, but for the occasional ridge. Then, climbing through the tangled vegetation, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching us, something huge and dangerous, and that now it was following us.

The first day was bad. It wasn't just the sheer physical exertion, it was the constant dim light underneath the mist sapping will and blackening mood. I knew Tameera and Tholan would not reach us that day, but I also knew that they could be back overhead in the blimp by the following morning blue if they traveled all night. But they would stop to rest. Certainly they knew they had all the time they wanted to take to find and kill us.

As the sun went down, Anders erected one blister tent on a forty-degree slab—there was no room for the other tent. I set about gathering some of the many rock conches surrounding us. We still had rations, but I thought we should use such abundance, as the opportunity might not present itself later on. I also collected female spider vine flowers, and the sticky buds in the crotch branches of walker trees. I half expected Anders to object when I began broiling the molluscs, but she did not. The conches were like chewy fish, the flowers were limp and slightly sweet lettuce, the buds have no comparison in Earthly food because none is so awful. Apparently, it was a balanced diet. I packed away the stove and followed Anders into the blister tent just as it seemed the branches surrounding us were beginning to move. Numerous large warty octupals were dragging them-



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selves through the foliage. They were a kind unknown to me, therefore a kind not commonly encountered, else I would have received something on them in the Almanac's general load.

In the morning, I was chafed from the straps in our conjoined sleeping bags (they stopped us ending up in the bottom of the bag on that slope) and irritable. Anders was not exactly a bright light either. Maybe certain sugars were lacking in the food we had eaten, because, after munching down ration bars while we packed away our equipment, we quickly started to feel a lot better. Or maybe it was some mist-born equivalent of SAD.

An hour after we set out, travel became a lot easier and a lot more dangerous. Before, the masses of vegetation on the steep slopes, though greatly slowing our progress, offered a safety net if either of us fell. Now we were quickly negotiating slopes not much steeper than the slab on which Anders had moored the tent the previous night, and sparse of vegetation. If we fell here, we would just accelerate down to a steeper slope or sheer drop, and a final impact in some dank rocky sump. We were higher, I think, than the day before—the mist thinner. The voice of the gabbleduck was mournful and distant there.

"Urecoblank . . . scudder," it called, perhaps trying to lure its next meal.

"Shit, shit," I said as I instinctively tried to increase my pace and slipped over, luckily catching hold before I slid down.

"Easy," said Anders.

I just hoped the terrain would put the damned thing off, but somehow I doubted that. There seemed to me something almost supernatural about the creature. Until actually seeing the damned thing, I had never believed there was one out here. I'd thought Myral's gabbleduck as mythical as mermaids and centaurs on Earth.

"What the hell is that thing doing here anyway?" I asked.

"Probably escaped from a private collection," Anders replied. "Perhaps someone bought it as a pet and got rid of it when it stopped being cute."

"Like that thing was ever cute?" I asked.

Midday, and the first Optek shots began wanging off the stone around us, and the shadow of my blimp drew above. A kind of lightness infected me then. I knew, one way or another, that we were going to die, and that knowledge just freed me of all responsibility to myself and to the future.

"You fucking missed!" I bellowed.

"That'll soon change!" came Tholan's distant shout.

"There's no need to aggravate him," Anders hissed.

"Why? Might he try to kill us?" I spat back.

Even so, I now led us on a course taking us lower down into the mist. The firing tracked us, but I reckoned the chances of us being hit were remote. Tholan must have thought the same, because the firing soon ceased. When we stopped to rest under cover of thicker vegetation, I checked my palm com and nearly sobbed on seeing that in one and half days we had covered less than three kilometers. It was about right, but still disheartening. Then, even worse, I saw that ahead, between two mounts, there was a ridge we must climb over to stay on course. To take another route involved a detour of tens of kilometers. Undoubtedly, the ridge rose out of the mist. Undoubtedly, Tholan had detected it on his palm com too.



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"What do we do?" Anders asked.
"We have to look. Maybe there'll be some sort of cover."
"Seeble grubber," muttered the gabbleduck in the deeper mist below us.
"It's fucking following us," I whispered.
Anders just nodded.
Then even more bad news came out of the mist.

I couldn't figure out quite what I was seeing out there in the canyon beside us, momentarily visible through the mist. Then, all of a sudden, the shape, on the end of its thin but hugely tough line, became recognizable. I was looking at a four-pronged blimp anchor, with disposable cams taped to each of the prongs. We got moving again, heading for that ridge. I equated getting to the other side with safety. Ridiculous, really.

"He's got . . . infrared . . . on them," I said, between gasps.

A fusillade sounding like the full fifty-round clip of an Optek slammed into the slope just ahead of us.

"Of course . . . he's no way . . . of knowing which camera . . . is pointing . . . where," I added.

Then a flare dropped, bouncing from limb to limb down through the vertical jungle, and the firing came again, strangely, in the same area. I glimpsed the anchor again, further out and higher. Tholan and his sister had no real experience of piloting a blimp—it wasn't some gravcar they could set on autopilot. Soon we saw the remains of what they had been targeting: an old sheq too decrepit to keep up with its seven, probably replaced by a new hatching. It was hanging over the curved fibrous bough of a walker tree, great holes ripped through its body by Optek bullets.

We climbed higher as the slope became steeper, came to the abrupt top edge of this forest of walker trees, made quick progress stepping from horizontal trunk to trunk with the wall of stone beside us. After a hundred meters of this, we had to do some real climbing up through a crack to a slope we could more easily negotiate. My feet were sore and my legs ached horribly. Constantly walking along slopes like this put pressure on feet and ankles they were certainly not accustomed to. I wondered just how long my boots and gloves would last in this terrain. They were tough—made with monofiber materials used by the military—but nothing is proof against constant abrasion on stone. Maybe a hundred days of this? Who was I kidding?

By midday, we were on the slope that curved round below one of the mounts, then blended into the slope leading up to the ridge. Checking the map on my palm com, I saw that there was likely a gutter between the ridge and the mount. I showed this to Anders.

"There may be cover there," I said.

She stared at me, dark rings under her eyes—too exhausted to care. We both turned then, and peered down into the mist and canted forests. There came the sound of huge movement, the cracking of walker trunks, broken vegetation showering down through the trees below us.

"Come on." I had no devil-may-care left in me. I was just as weary as Anders. We reached the gutter, which was abundant with hand and footholds, but slippery with rock-slime. We climbed slowly and carefully



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up through thinning mist. Then the blimp anchor rappeled down behind and above us like an iron chandelier.

"Surprise!" Tameera called down to us.

The mist was now breaking, and I glimpsed the lumpy peak of the mount looming to our left. Higher up, its propellers turning lazily to hold it against a breeze up from the ridge, floated my blimp. Tholan and Tameera stood out on the catwalk. Both of them armed, and I was sure I could see them grinning even from that distance. I swore and rested my forehead against slimy stone. We had about ten meters of clear air to the top of the ridge, then probably the same over the other side. No way could we move fast enough—not faster than a speeding bullet. I looked up again. Fuck them. I wasn't going to beg, I wasn't going to try to make any last-minute deals. I turned to Anders.

"We'll just keep climbing," I said.

She nodded woodenly, and I led the way. A shot slammed into the rock just above me, then went whining down the gutter. They were playing, for the moment. I glanced up, saw that the blimp was drifting sideways toward the mount. Then I saw it.

The arm folded out and out. The wrongness I felt about it, I guess, stemmed from the fact that it possessed too many joints. A three-fingered hand, with claws like black scythes, closed on the blimp anchor and pulled. Seated on the peak, the gabbleduck looked like some monstrous child holding the string of a toy balloon.

"Brong da lockock," it said.

Leaning over the catwalk rail, Tholan tried pumping shots into the monster. Tameera shrank back against the cabin's outer wall, making a high keening sound. The gabbleduck gave the blimp anchor a sharp tug, and Tholan went over the edge, one long scream as he fell, turned to an oomph as the monster caught him in one of its many hands. It took his rifle and tossed it away like the stick from a cocktail sausage, then it stuffed him into its bill.

"Keep going!" Anders shoved me in the back.

"It used us as bait to get them," I said.

"And now it doesn't need us."

I continued to climb, mindful of my handholds, aware that the gabbleduck was now coming down off its mount. We reached the ridge. I glanced down the other side into more mist, more slopes. I looked aside as the gabbleduck slid down into mist, towing the blimp behind it, Tameera still keening. It had its head tilted back and with one hand was shoving Tholan deeper into its bill. After a moment, it seemed to get irritated, and tore his kicking legs away while it swallowed the rest of him. Then the mist engulfed the monster, the blimp shortly afterwards. Tameera's keening abruptly turned to a long agonized scream, then came a crunching sound.

"It'll come for us next," said Anders, eyeing the stirring mist, then shoving me again.

We didn't stand a chance out here—I knew that.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I passed back the ring of the line that joined us together. "Wind it in."



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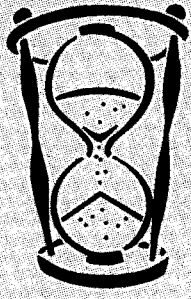
She set the little motor running, orange line-cladding falling around her feet. I glanced at her and saw dull acceptance that I was abandoning her at last. The large shape came up out of the mist, shuddering. I began to run along the ridge. It was a guess, a hope, a chance—on such things might your life depend.

The anchor was snagging in the outer foliage of walker trees and the blimp, now free of two man weights and released by the gabbleduck, was rising again. I was going for the line first, though I'm damned if I know how I would have climbed the four millimeter-thick cable. At the last moment, I accelerated, and leapt: three meters out and dropping about the same distance down. My right leg snapped underneath me on the roof of the cabin, but I gave it no time to hurt. I dragged myself to the edge, swung down on the blimp cables, and was quickly in through the airtight door. First, I hit the controls to fold the anchor and reel in the cable, then I was in the pilot's seat making the blimp vent gas and turning it toward where Anders waited. Within minutes, she was on the catwalk and inside and I was pumping gas back into the blimp again. But we weren't going anywhere.

"Oh no . . . no!" Anders's feeling of the unfairness of it all was in that protest. I stared out at the array of green eyes, and at the long single claw it had hooked over the catwalk rail. I guessed that it would winkle us out of the cabin like the meat of a rock conch from its shell. I didn't suppose the bubble metal alloys would be much hindrance to it.

"Gurble," said the gabbleduck, then suddenly its claw was away from the rail and we were rising again. Was it playing with us? We moved closer to the windows and looked down, said nothing until we were certainly out of its reach, said nothing for some time after that. At the last, and I don't care how certain the scientists are that they are just animals, I'm damned sure that the gabbleduck waved to us. ❍

## VELOCITY, OR, AN IMPERFECT UNDERSTANDING



There is a way to keep you nine forever.
Give me a lever, a place to stand,
a fast enough ship, and you will be ageless.

If I launch you like a hawk from my hand
into the delirious burning blue,
I will gain all the time on Earth that I need
to ready myself for your being ten.

—Tracina Jackson-Adams



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**Bantam gave Liz Williams her most recent American book publication when they released *Banner of Souls* last fall. The novel has picked up the author's third nomination for a Philip K. Dick Award. Her other books include *The Ghost Sister, Empire of Bones, The Poison Master,* and *Nine Layers of Sky.* In addition, Liz has had over forty short stories published in *Asimov's, Interzone, Realms of Fantasy,* and *The Third Alternative.* In her latest tale, a young woman on a perilous academic expedition finds out what it means to cast . . .**

# A SHADOW OVER THE LAND

Liz Williams

I always knew that one day I would return to the veldt, to the light and the silence. At night, when I closed my eyes, I could see the veldt rolling before me in the darkness, all the way to the rocks of the Damara. They are red with iron, great rusted cliffs that lift up out of the plains. Further in lies the Ushete Rift and the range that the early settlers to this world called the Mountains of the Moon, meaning both a barren land, and home. Gahran has a moon, too, and when it rises over the Ushete, it seems close enough to touch, but I knew nothing of this land when I first came there.

I first went to the veldt a year ago. The university had sent me out to Yaounde, close to the border, with team leader Andre Vauchelade. I hadn't been at the university for very long. I had arrived on Gahran from Earth, where I'd held a post at Nairobi. I was less sure of myself, a year ago. More things seemed to matter to me, and to matter more. The Yaounde expedition seemed fraught with importance. I had so much to prove, both as a young researcher and as a woman from Earth. Vauchelade had a reputation as an exacting man, who was hard to work for and harder to like. I remember sitting on the edge of my bed the night before we left, clasping



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my hands together until they hurt, and thinking that I must not fail, that I must be perfect in all that I did. Now, I look back and wonder. I failed, certainly, to make my reputation or even to protect my name, and now it hardly matters.

I lived out the last year in the city, went to the university by day and came back at night to write and sleep. At work, I kept myself to myself, as far as that was possible with a hundred and seventy students to worry about. Yet somewhere at the back of my mind, I was always aware of the contrast, of the part of the world that was absent.

Irubin, where I lived, was one of the big transcontinental ports: you could stand on one end of the Benue Bridge and look across to the distant hazy shore on the other side. The city straddled a long arm of the sea, but on the shore beneath the bridge, there was only an echo of salt on the wind, and the water was sepia with river sand. I tried to escape at weekends to the northern coast, to the long sweep of Hama beach beyond the shanty blocks, and watch the breakers roll in. I never found what I was looking for, and never expected to, for the veldt had marked me, and I could never see the city in the same way again.

In the veldt, there is no one and there is no water, unless one follows the thin line of the river Ghila. It was barren land, to the unschooled eye, but I am a geologist, and it was rich country for me. I could see life everywhere, the lost life of this world that had ebbed to leave its traces in the rocks.

Yaounde had been established as a military outpost some seventy years ago, when the first settlers arrived and no one knew what lived out in the veldt. This was before they discovered how empty this world really was, with only the thinnest scattering of life of its own. When we came through the building at the end of the little airstrip, there was a single soldier, in the khaki uniform of the SSC, clutching a semi-automatic. He looked no more than fourteen. Vauchelade, ignoring the gun and the uniform, made him help us with the bags. Poor Professor, I thought. Short, white, and with the florid face of the South African Boer, he could not have looked more out of place. He was sweating profusely and I felt suddenly sorry for him.

"You'll have to sign in," the soldier said, trying to rescue some dignity. I felt sorry for him, too. He'd joined the army because it sounded more exciting than a life spent working for his dad on some country farm, and now here he was, guarding an isolated airstrip on a world that has no enemies.

"Whatever," Vauchelade said, then strode past the front desk and out onto the forecourt. The soldier and I followed. "Where's the car?" Vauchelade said impatiently. "I told them when we were coming. This is bloody typical!" I sat down on the bags. The sudden rush of heat had hit me. It was much hotter than the damp air of Irubin, or even Nairobi.

"Did you take your pills?" Vauchelade asked.

"No, I forgot." I said meekly. He did not bother to reply. I knew what he was thinking. We'd only been here fifteen minutes, and already I was doing things wrong. I fumbled in the stretch case for the packet of capsules and extracted two. God only knows what they did to you. I felt them trav-



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el the length of my dry throat and then an icy chill spread upward from my stomach, constricting my heart. It felt like fever.

"Give them a minute to work," Vauchelade said, not unsympathetically. I nodded. "You'll still sweat, but they do cool you down. Look, here's the car."

It was an old general terrain vehicle. The engine cover was missing, removed to cool the engine. The driver hopped down and slung the bags into the back of the GTV.

"Careful with those," Vauchelade said irritably. "There's some delicate instruments in there."

"Sorry," the driver said, perfunctorily. He handed me into the back seat; Vauchelade took the front.

"I hope this isn't the assigned team vehicle," Vauchelade said over his shoulder. "I'm not taking anything in this condition out into the veldt."

I watched the streets unfold through the filthy window of the GTV. It was a good example of frontier military architecture: row after row of prefabs and one four-story compartment building festooned with satellite equipment. The drive did not last long. Yaounde was not a large place, and we were staying in the single hotel.

When we arrived, I collected the imprint for my room and went straight upstairs. The little window looked out onto a dusty backyard filled with petrol drums and an old mattress. I think my culture shock was finally beginning, fueled by disappointment. I had come all this way, out to another world, and it was just like home.

I remembered my grandfather telling me about those early days, when a Settler's claim had been finally granted to Gahran. He was an engineer, my granddad, and he had been in space, on one of the lunar projects. He said that he and his people had been filled with hope, that there was at last a land of their own: a new Africa. I think he really felt it was a kind of return to Eden, given by God, where they could avoid the mistakes of the past and start again, be the people they once were. To some extent, he had been right. Irubin was one of the great cities of the human worlds, and Somalai, and Rununda. But not Yaounde, I thought. Yaounde was the same as everywhere else. I had not felt that I belonged in Nairobi. I did not feel that I belonged here, either. I stood and stared out of the little window, and when the phone shrilled, it made me jump. The female voice on the other end was unfamiliar.

"Dr. Selu?"

"Yes?" I said.

"My name's Essengene Tesh. I'm with the outpost team? The guys that you're replacing."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was supposed to call you earlier in the week. I couldn't get hold of you."

"No, I know. Something came up. I had to go up-border. I'm actually downstairs now, in the bar. If you're not too tired, I thought we could have some lunch?"

"Yes," I told her. "Yes, that would be good."

Essengene Tesh was a handsome woman in her mid-forties. She was wearing military gear, which confused me until she said, disarmingly,



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"Everything else is in the wash. I borrowed these from the colonel . . . Otherwise you wouldn't have wanted to sit next to me, I'm afraid."

"We had an eight-hour flight from Irubin. I wouldn't have noticed," I said, and she laughed.

"When I get back to Irubin, I'm going to hire a salon for a week and live in it. But I envy you, Dr. Selu," she added, suddenly serious. "You don't know how much you'll like it, out there."

"You can call me Assia," I said. "How do you know I'll like it?" I asked, curiously. She looked at me for a moment. In the darkness of the bar, her eyes were impenetrable, hooded.

"Oh, you will. Whether *Vauchelade* will, I don't know. Maybe, maybe not."

"The professor's been here before."

"Yes," Tesh said, considering. "He has and he hasn't. I don't think he's ever really *seen* things out here. He's a good geologist, mind, I'm not saying he's not. But there's more out there than rocks."

"I thought the veldt was uninhabited."

"No one lives there. I don't mean there's mysterious alien life or anything. It's hard to explain."

She looked up and smiled at Vauchelade, who had appeared through the door of the bar, and the conversation turned to more practical matters. We would leave Yaounde early the next morning, head out to the base camp, and set up in preparation for the arrival of the team. Most of the equipment would be inherited from the departing group, but the instrumentation relevant to Vauchelade's own research would need to be assembled. Tesh briefed us on the previous month's findings and gave us a copy of the field notes before driving out to the airstrip to sort out the departure details. When she had gone, Vauchelade said, "I wouldn't worry too much about what Dr. Tesh tells you."

"About. . . ?"

"The veldt. I've heard her views before." He smiled indulgently. "She's a very spiritual woman." I did not think it was meant to be a compliment.

"I've read her papers in the AGA journals," I said, wanting to defend her.

"Oh, she's very competent, I suppose." He picked up the bill and looked around for the pay-in. "I should get some rest, if I were you. We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow, and there's not a great deal we can do here. I need to get the transport sorted out."

I wandered back up to my room and lay down on the bed. It was stuffy, and the bed cover seemed far too thick. It made my skin itch uncomfortably, but I must have fallen asleep, because when I next opened my eyes, the light that poured through the little window was thick and golden.

When I looked at my watch I discovered that it was four in the afternoon. I showered and changed, then went downstairs. Reception was deserted. I stepped out into the street, still feeling the remnants of sleep around me. It was very quiet, and the sun was sinking to cast long shadows across the packed ochre earth of the road. I must have dreamed as I lay sleeping in the stuffy hotel room, because I could not shake the feeling that I had been speaking to someone. I felt light-headed and strange, and



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wondered whether it was some after-effect of the temperature control, but then I realized that I was hungry.

Even in the smallest place, there is always a market. In Yaounde, it lay at the back of the temple and consisted of a few stalls selling household goods, cheap clothes, and fast food. The smell of frying plantain made my mouth water. At the end was a café, a lot more appealing than the dark and arid bar of the hotel. I went in and sat down. It was full of people: soldiers and mining personnel. Everyone seemed to know one another, no surprise in a place as small as this. I typed my order into the keypad, and, as I did so, something warm butted against my shins, startling me. The woman sitting opposite me reached under the table and extracted a small child, who gave me a long and uncertain stare.

"Sorry," the woman said.

"That's okay. She just made me jump."

"You're with the scientists?"

It's always the same in a small town; they like to place you, to know who you are.

"Yes, that's right. We're here for the next six weeks or so."

"Out in the Rift," the woman said, wonderingly.

"Have you been there?"

She smiled at me. "No, never. Why would I?"

The little girl was marching a plastic doll across the table. She was making it talk, babbling away on its behalf.

"Who's dolly talking to?" her mother asked. The child gave a radiant smile.

"Demelo."

Her mother laughed. "Oh, okay." I did not recognize the word. The woman gave her daughter a pat. "Come on. We should be getting back." She hefted the child into her arms, and, at that point, my food arrived. I did not see them go.

I went to bed early that night and had no dreams that I can remember. The next day was hot, even so soon after dawn, and a bright glaze lay across the sky. The sun rested in a bronze halo above the distant cliffs of the Rift. Vauchelade wanted to get going before the heat became too intense to travel. He had acquired a ground car from the military base, which proved both smoother and faster than the GTV. Yaounde fell behind us in a cloud of dust. For the first thirty kilometers, we saw scattered farmsteads—round, white perma-domes surrounded by fields—and then there was nothing but the plains. The veldt is arid, speckled with stones and tufts of coarse grass. We saw no life, and the sky, a lid the color of bone, was empty of birds.

The dust of the Ushete is also the color of rust. It rose up in a soft cloud, lifted by the wheels of the car, to settle against the windscreen. Vauchelade switched on the airwipers, but the dust continued to swirl up to hide the plains from view. Vauchelade turned the wipers to a constant setting and sealed the windows. The air inside the vehicle became icy. I tried to adjust the control, but to no effect. It was like traveling through some cold, dark night.

At last, Vauchelade pulled the wheel of the car over sharply and turned



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the engine off. The roar of the AC seemed loud in the sudden silence. I opened the door and slid out. It was very quiet and very still. The mountains of the Rift rose up before me and they were red as blood in the light of the distant sun. They rolled up in a series of crumpled folds as far as the horizon to conceal the immense fissure of the Rift itself. The wind carried a dry, harsh heat and the smell of the parched land.

Vauchelade said, "The camp's at the edge of the Rift. We won't be able to take the car much further. There's a track leading down to the site."

We got back into the car and Vauchelade drove for a short distance along the rudimentary track made by an earlier vehicle. The track wound between the crimson rocks until it opened out onto a short plateau. The Rift lay beyond. Stepping down from the vehicle, I walked to the edge and looked out across the Ushete.

Compared to other features on other worlds, I suppose, it was not the most spectacular formation of its kind. Even so, the scale of the Rift left me momentarily breathless. From the lip of the plateau, the ground fell abruptly into a great chasm, which snaked away into the distance. It was like standing on the very edge of the world. A single step, I thought, and I would not fall but float down into the gap, down forever, and never reach an end. It seemed as though the world had become inverted, as though all the skies and the starry plains beyond were contained in the space beneath my feet. Somewhere beyond vertigo, I reeled, and the world spun around me in a reversed image: light turning to darkness and the rocks of the Rift burning like fire. Then Vauchelade was pulling me back.

"Careful," he said, genially enough, but there was an edge to his voice.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Look." Vauchelade pointed into the endless gap of the Rift. "See the strata running across the ledge? That's what I want to take a look at. An interesting product of what we're calling the Metosaic." He was holding my arm in a tight grip. He probably meant to be kind.

We walked back to the car and began to unload the instruments. The temperature control kept me cool, but the heat burst over my skin like a wave and I could taste the dust on my tongue. It was reassuring and familiar, like the dust that covered the streets of Dushange Street and which my mother swept from the steps every morning. I closed my eyes for a moment, and, when I opened them, I expected to see the low house between the lemon trees, and the globes of the fruit yellow as suns among the leaves.

Laden with the bags, I followed Vauchelade. He seemed to vanish over the lip of the Rift, but when I reached the place where he had gone, I realized that a steep little path led down to a second, wider ledge. The pale tops of the dome tents billowed up in the wind from the Rift. A small figure stepped out and waved: as we descended, I recognized Tesh. There were two main tents, the living quarters, and a smaller nest of domes, like mushrooms, which housed the equipment. The gear belonging to the departing team was packed and piled at the entrance to one of the larger tents, ready to go.

"—but we're actually going to wait until evening," Tesh was explaining to Vauchelade. She ran a hand over her forehead, pushing back the dark



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braids. "I don't want to slog three hundred miles in this heat." Vauchelade nodded.

"I think that's wise," he said.

"When are the rest of your team coming?" Tesh asked.

"They might be in Yaounde now. As soon as I can put a call through I'll find out. They may decide to set out tonight."

A second person emerged from the tent, a young man with a round, cheerful face.

"Hi," he said, smiling at us. "Dr. Vauchelade and Dr. Selu, I presume?"

"That's right," I said. "And—I'm guessing—you're Clayton Richards?"

"Good guess. Yes, I'm Clay."

"Well," Vauchelade said. "Since we've got two or three hours before you go, why don't you bring me up to date on your readings?"

"Sure." Richards held the flap of the tent open for us. We followed him into the cool half-light of the main tent. The amount of research that they had managed to complete was impressive. Vauchelade nodded approvingly.

"This is really good stuff," he said. Tesh grinned.

"This," she told him, "*This* is the piece de resistance." She handed him a series of slides and a sample box. As Vauchelade examined it, his face changed.

"My God," he said.

"Bet you haven't seen anything like that before," Tesh said.

"Well, no, I haven't," he admitted. He handed the slide to me. It showed a microscope sample, and it was beautiful. It was part of a crystalline fragment. Azure spires reared upward, an Ethiopian city in miniature, iridescent as a peacock's feather.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It doesn't have a name yet," Richards said. "But we're calling it essengenite, after its discoverer."

"And who knows what else is out there?" Tesh said. I felt a snaking knot of emotions grip my stomach: pride in her achievement, a measure of jealousy, and most of all, ambition. This discovery could make Tesh's name in contemporary geology. I felt her eyes upon me and knew that she saw what I was feeling. It was an oddly compassionate gaze, as though the discovery was something that had almost ceased to be of importance to her.

We spent the rest of the afternoon setting up the equipment. Vauchelade put a call through to Yaounde and learned that the team was ready to set off.

"Should be with you by midnight," a crackling, disembodied voice announced.

"Good," Vauchelade said.

"Well," Tesh remarked, straightening up from behind the instrument bank. "I guess Clay and I should think about making a move."

When we stepped outside the tent, I found that the wind had dropped and the sky had become infused with the intense rosy glow of sunset. The sun itself had disappeared beneath the edge of the Ushete, as if devoured by the Rift.

"Look," Tesh said. She turned me around to face the mountains. The moon was rising, filling the whole world, enormous in the sunset sky.



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"Close enough to touch, isn't it?" she said. The mountains of the moon were outlined in a sharp rim of shadow. The great disc bore no semblance of a face, as the Europeans like to think, nor the long-eared hare seen by people in Asia. Its craters formed a meaningless pattern on which no interpretation could be placed. In Irubin, they call it "the mirror," for when you look upon it you are confronted only with yourself.

I said goodbye to Tesh and Richards and walked with them up the track to the plateau where their own vehicle was parked. I watched as they sped away, sending the dust up in a moonlit cloud. Then I walked again to the edge of the plateau and looked across. The moon, clear of the mountain rim, hung over my shoulder, and the Rift fell away in a ridged mass of shadow. The tilted, serrated spines lay like bones, as though something almost too vast to be imagined had laid itself down to die. I stepped back from the edge. My shadow raced away from me, elongated by the end of the light, and, within my shadow, I saw a deeper patch of darkness. I thought at first it was a stone, but then it moved. I had the same sensation that I had experienced that afternoon. The scar of blackness was small enough to lie within the confines of my shadow, and yet, at the same time, it seemed huge, encompassing the valley, the mountains, and the roseate moon. It lasted only a second or two. It left me completely disoriented, and it was a moment before I was able to recollect myself and head back to the camp.

Vauchelade said that he would wait up until the team arrived, but that there was no need for me to do so. He went up to check the car, and I found a camp bed in the back tent and claimed it, setting up an energy field to keep out insects. It did not take long to drop into sleep, but, in the early hours of the night, I was awoken by the wind. It roared overhead, beating at the tent as though it were a drum. I lay and listened to the wind, and it seemed to me, half-dreaming, that I could hear a voice in the wind, crying out. Toward dawn, the storm blew out, but it was too late for sleep. I got up and made my way around the stacks of equipment to the makeshift shower rig. Then, a little refreshed, I stepped out of the tent into the morning. The sun was coming up over the distant ridges, infusing the land with a gray light. It was very cold. A swirl of wind blew across the ground, rolling the loose earth before it. Vauchelade was perched precariously above the drop, tapping data into the daily log.

"Good morning," he said, courteously enough. "It's been quite a wild night. Did you get any sleep?"

"I slept a little," I said.

"Storms blow up fast in this area," Vauchelade said. "One moment, it's a clear sky, and, the next minute, you're choking with dust. The satellites pick them up, but you can't always get a link."

"Are the others still coming?" I asked.

"They should be, later. I tried to get through last night, but the storm knocked out any communication." He was staring out across the Rift, his eyes narrowed against the sunlight. "Right. Get yourself something to eat and then we'll make a start. There are a number of things I'd like you to be getting on with today."

My first morning in the Rift was spent with my hands in the sink,



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washing samples. Vauchelade climbed down onto a lower ledge and did not return until noon.

"You've finished here? Good," he said. "Haven't they got here yet?"

"There's been no sign of anyone," I said.

"Well, that's very odd," Vauchelade said, evidently annoyed. "They should be here by now." He began to fiddle with the radio, from which a distorted crackling sound emanated. I left him to it, and went into the adjacent tent to vacuum pack the smaller samples. When I came back in, Vauchelade had got through and was conducting a one-sided conversation. I heard him say, reluctantly, "Well, all right then. I suppose that will have to do," and then he switched the radio off. Leaning back in his chair, he said irritably, "That's that then. They're stuck. That storm deposited half the dust in the Rift onto the Upper Veldt. The road's blocked. They're trying to hire an aircar, which will send us way over budget." He glared at me, as though I was directly responsible for our present plight. "Well, what are you standing there for? There's work to be done."

Vauchelade wanted samples from the lower cliffs in order to build up a picture of the strata.

"Sort out whatever you need from the stack," he instructed me. "I presume you're familiar with the relevant equipment?"

"I think so," I said. I wanted to tell him that we had covered basic tasks such as this one in our second term of university, and I was a post-doctoral student, but I let it go. Instead, I went into the tent and sorted out the necessary gear, but there was something missing. I could not find the sounding gauge. It was such a small thing, and could easily be overlooked. I ransacked the equipment stack and then I went back into the main tent and looked there. At last, it occurred to me that Vauchelade might have taken it for his own testing that morning. Feeling stupid, I went over to the big collapsible box that he used for his personal equipment and opened the top drawer. There was the sounding gauge, stuffed inside with packets of soil. Brilliant Vauchelade may have been, but his working methods left a lot to be desired. I tugged the sounding gauge free, and the contents of the drawer spilled out across the floor. And into my lap fell the piece of rock that Essengene Tesh had discovered, blue as the hem of Isis' robe. I picked it up and stared at it.

"What are you doing with that? Put it back," Vauchelade's voice came from immediately behind my ear.

"I was looking for the sounding gauge," I said. "I thought that Tesh took this with her?"

"No. She left all her samples here, so we could ship everything back at once," Vauchelade said, with restrained patience. He added, "Come along, Dr. Selu. We haven't got all day."

I placed the blue fragment back inside the drawer and followed him outside. Vauchelade suggested that he should cover the top end of the bluff, while I sampled the lower ledge.

"I'll have to winch you down in the cradle," Vauchelade said. "It's a damn nuisance, being so short-handed. Still, we'll just have to make the best of it. I'm sure you can handle it. You've done this sort of thing before, haven't you?"



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"In the Caucasus. With Jerry Hutton. We—"

"Yes, yes," Vauchelade said. "Help me with the winch."

Together, we carried the light extendable winch down to the lip of the canyon and stood back as it assembled itself. He had some expensive equipment with him, for all his griping about the budget.

"Keep attached to the guide rope at all times," Vauchelade said, "And give me a call on the portable when you're ready to come up."

"No problem," I said. I wanted to show him that I could, as he had suggested, handle it on my own.

I strapped myself into the cradle and was winched slowly down the cliff. The ledge on which I landed was no more than a few feet wide, but there was adequate space in which to work. Methodically, I started my sampling; photographing the strata and then taking core samples of each separate formation. It was very quiet within the valley of the Rift, and very hot. The sun had baked the floor of the ledge into a pavement of cracked bricks, and there was a smell of earth and heat. I worked in a kind of dream, the repetitive action sending me almost into trance. Somewhere at the back of my mind, like a pebble at the bottom of a well, lay the thought of Tesh's blue stone, which should have been with her, but was not.

I did not realize how late it had become until I glanced at the watch attached to my belt and saw that it was well after six. I finished what I was doing and packed everything into the pouches of the cradle. Then I spoke into the portable.

"Professor Vauchelade?" I said. "I'm ready to come up now."

No one answered. I switched the portable to a higher frequency and tried again. I may as well have spoken into the deep and empty air of the Rift. It did not yet occur to me that anything might be seriously wrong. I knew that certain formations blocked out the frequency from the portable, and Vauchelade might have moved out of range. I set the portable on an automatic signal, and sat down on the hard earth. Heat burned out from the Rift wall. My sunsuit protected me from the worst of it, but it was still uncomfortably hot. I was grateful for the little breeze that drifted down the Valley, sending the fine sand skittering across the floor of the ledge.

Slowly the wind began to grow. The entranced complacency of the afternoon faded and I began to feel uneasy. The portable was still transmitting, to no effect. At first, I think I wondered whether something had happened to Vauchelade. The golden light that poured into the valley was hazed with dust, a veil borne on the rising wind. I looked down at my hand, and saw the dark skin dulled beneath a spice-colored film. The dust had crept underneath the wrist seal of the sunsuit, and it itched where it rubbed against the skin. I turned back to the cradle, trying to see whether I might climb up the guide rope to the brow of the cliff, but when I looked upward, I could no longer see the top of the bluff. It was hidden by the dust. I pulled at the rope, and watched in disbelief as it uncoiled down the cliff and fell snaking around my ankles. It had come detached from the winch.

I shouted into the portable, and still there came no answer. A gust of



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wind buffeted me, nearly sending me over the edge, and throwing me onto my knees. Beyond the ledge, the Rift valley was filled with a shifting sea of dust, red waves rolling up to burst like spray against the ledge. It filled my mouth; I spat and rubbed my eyes, and, for a moment, I saw the sun riding, bright as garnet, through the boiling storm. I thought, *I am going to die,* and then everything seemed to right itself. I breathed dust, and there at the edges of the storm I sensed again a shadow, vast as the Rift and burning like the sun. It grew as vast as the world. It filled the Rift, welling up from it like water—and then I knew that it was nothing more than the Rift itself.

I understood then what Tesh had discovered: not the shard of rock that would be named after her, but something else, the *presence* of the land. Each place has its own spirit, born out of rock, and wind, and earth. I was choking on dust, and I was going to die, and it seemed hardly important. I was part of a place; I belonged. I plunged my hands into the dust that covered the ledge, and laughed.

Since I am here to tell you this story, it is evident that I did not, after all, die there. A wave of warm air washed over me, and above the wind, I heard the sound of a propulsion system. Minutes later, Vauchelade and a woman I did not know were bundling me onto a stretcher and I was being lifted up into the bowels of the aircar. They gave me a shot, and pumped out my lungs, and so I did not see the aircar lift out as the storm spilled over the edges of the Rift to engulf the camp and the reaches of the Upper Veldt.

When I came round, we were running ahead of the storm back to Yaounde and I made a thorough nuisance of myself trying to explain what it was that I had experienced. Vauchelade snorted. The others clearly thought I was raving, with the exception of one woman, Gereta Apere, who looked at me strangely and said, "I know what you mean. I was born on a farmstead near New Cape, not far from the edge of the Rift. They call it *demelo*. A shadow over the land. Not everyone sees it. They say it is a sign that the land has accepted you, that it will save your life when it can, that you will enter its spirit when you die."

She didn't say anything more, and I relapsed into a fitful sleep. We reached Yaounde safely, and I spent the night at the medical center. They discharged me the next morning, and though my throat felt as though it had been sandpapered, I was clear-headed and in need of answers. I went in search of Vauchelade at the hotel, only to be told that he had returned to Irubin.

"He told us what happened," Apere said. "You must have called him, but he was in one of the side gullies and the portable failed to receive. At last, he went in search of you and found that the winch had disassembled, some nano failure. He was standing at the top of the cliff when we arrived. He was about to climb down to you, he said."

"Can I speak to Tesh?" I asked her.

She looked at the floor and said, "Dr. Selu, there's something you should know. Dr. Tesh and her colleague never reached Yaounde. They were caught in last night's storm. There's been a patrol out looking for them, and they found the vehicle this morning. They'd gone over the edge into a gully. Didn't the professor tell you?"



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"He knew?" I said.

"Yes, of course. I told him myself, over the radio. Perhaps he didn't want you to be upset."

"I'm sure that's it," I said. I was thinking of Essengene Tesh and the azure mineral that would have made the name and the reputation of its discoverer. I was wondering where Vauchelade had been, that first night, whether he would have had time to follow the departing team members, and, if so, what a ruthlessly ambitious man would have done. Or perhaps he was merely prepared to take advantage of a tragic accident, and dispose of the only other person who knew that Tesh had been the one to find the mineral. Outside, the morning sun spilled heat across the parched garden of the hotel, but the atrium seemed very cold.

"I have to get back to Irubin," I said.

I need not have worried. I returned to find my department mourning the loss of a promising geologist, and celebrating the discovery that she had made. Tesh, it seemed, had possessed the forethought to transmit the details through to the university. They were grateful to Vauchelade for bringing her sample back with him. I said nothing. I had no proof that Vauchelade had done anything. My contract at the university was extended, and they placed me on Vauchelade's research program. We saw one another every day, but he seemed to have increasing difficulty in meeting my eyes. After a few months, he was awarded a chair at the University of Durban back on Earth, and left the department.

My year in Irubin drew to an end. At the end of the year, I postponed an offer to renew my contract. I wanted, I told the Dean, to take a walking holiday, see a little more of Gahran, perhaps revisit the place where Tesh had made her discovery. Presumably, they thought I was referring to essengenite. At the edges of the Ushete Rift, they call it *demelo*, the shadow of the land, and so I am going to go walking in the veldt, until I can see the Mountains of the Moon, and find again what I hope I have not lost. O

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**Catherine Wells is the author of several science fiction novels and short stories, including *Mother Grimm* (Roc), and a finalist for the 1997 Philip K. Dick Award. She and her husband live in Tucson, Arizona, where she runs a science and technology library. You can read more about Catherine's works on her web site at *http://www.sff.net/people/catherine-wells.* Her first tale for us is the incendiary . . .**

# POINT OF ORIGIN

Catherine Wells

Ozzie was hip deep in paperwork when Dispatch called. "We need an investigator for a wildland fire."

His heart contracted. *Fire all around them, on both sides of the ravine, trees exploding like gas jets, flames shooting a hundred feet into the air*— Ozzie drew a deep breath to push back the incipient panic. "What fire is that?"

It was called the Matchless Fire, and so far it had destroyed eighty acres. Ozzie protested at being sent out to investigate its source; DWR wasn't supposed to get involved until a fire hit one hundred acres, or until interagency resources were called in. But Dispatch was adamant. "The investigator on the scene is calling for roadblocks," she told him. "You know what that means." Ozzie knew. It meant the fire had been set intentionally; it meant they might be looking at another terror attack.

Grimly, Ozzie collected all the available data on the Matchless Fire: satellite photos, infrared scans, topo maps, vegetation distribution. Everything the Incident Commander had to manage the wildfire suppression efforts was at Ozzie's fingertips. To it he added reports on other fires in the region, historical fire data, and evidence scanned in by the on-scene investigator, and he fed it all into ICCARUS, the Incident Command, Control And Reconnaissance Utility Software. The powerful integration software was designed specifically for fire management; it chewed the



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data, parsed it, collated and indexed it, applied algorithms and heuristics, and spat it back out as whole cloth.

All the way out to the scene, Ozzie's laptop unit spoke rationally to him of established facts, regional patterns, and percentages of probability, so by the time he pulled onto the last two-mile stretch of four-wheel drive road, he was ready to dispute the on-scene investigator. In fact, he was ready to castigate the on-scene investigator. This fire might have been human-caused, but not by a terrorist, and certainly not by anyone who might still be caught in a roadblock. It had been burning for at least eighteen hours; that was plenty of time for the perpetrator to flee.

A Forest Service pickup, painted its peculiar shade of sea green, was parked on the road in a low spot between two north-south ridges. Matchless Mesa rose up to the south, casting almost no shadow at this time of year. Late June was the worst time for wildland fires in Arizona: any spring runoff had long since evaporated, and the relentless sun raised mid-day temperatures, even in this mountainous country, to ninety degrees. If this was an intentional fire, the perp had picked the most damaging season to start it.

Ozzie pulled his truck in behind the Forest Service pickup and drew a deep breath. A trace of smoke reached him and his heart lurched, spurred by the adrenalin that surged into his blood. *Smoke so thick he couldn't breathe, choking, gasping, sucking in air that held no oxygen*— Ozzie gave himself a physical shake to break the effect. He had been out in the field a number of times since coming back to work three months ago, but not where he could smell smoke. He took another deep breath, fighting the irrational sensation of suffocation. Of course he could breathe. Of course the air was good. It was only the residual smell of woodsmoke; the fire had cleared this area last night, and a mop-up crew had been in already to make sure everything was cold dead. He could see them through the trees, upslope to the east, digging through the ash, methodically dousing every hotspot. Only the point of origin had been cordoned off, protected, until the investigation was through.

So Ozzie would meet with the investigator, establish the facts, and the mop-up crew could finish here. Gathering up his fire gloves and helmet, Ozzie looked around for his man.

Off to the right, about twenty yards from the road, a figure in fire gear stood placidly gazing up into the treetops, its back toward him. Ozzie checked the integrator for a name: Fuels Specialist Carol Ellison, Forest Service. Huh. Probably some newbie just out of college. He climbed stiffly out of the truck and slammed his door behind him.

Ellison didn't even glance in his direction. Ozzie scowled. It was a rare ranger who showed much respect for a DWR man, but it still irked him. She could at least acknowledge his presence. What was she studying, up there in the treetops? He stole a glance at them: junipers and pinyons mostly, with a couple of Apache pines and some Emory oaks, all widely spaced here on the arid slope of the Mogollon Rim. That towering wall of rock reared up just a couple of miles to the north, a two thousand foot upthrust marking the edge of the Colorado Plateau.

A breeze tugged at the fabric of Ozzie's yellow brush coat, and he



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thought how lucky it was that yesterday's gusty winds were dying out, and that cooler air was moving into the region. Had the weather gods been less kind, this would be a much bigger fire. Most of the country above and below the Rim was heavily forested, in spite of devastating fires in the first decade of the century. New growth was denser than old growth, and spindly like kindling. A stiff wind could push the fire from the surface up into the crowns, where it could grow by hundreds of acres in a single day.

In fact, right where Ellison was staring, the crowns were partially blackened. The fire had jumped into the canopy right here, at its supposed starting point—highly unusual. It made Ozzie question whether this was actually the point of origin. She probably had that wrong, too.

Irritated, he called to her. "Ellison?"

Without turning, she waved him over. Ozzie cursed under his breath, then gritted his teeth and limped slowly toward her, choosing his path carefully. There had been no fire between the road—if you could call two tracks in the dust a road—and where she stood; maybe it really had started here. Certainly the satellite photos had pinpointed this area as the starting point, but the fire had already been half an acre in size before the first image was taken, so that allowed some latitude. Ozzie watched where he stepped, careful not to disturb any evidence as he approached the forester. The smell of smoke was more intense here.

Ellison was tall for a woman, maybe five-ten, which gave her the impression of being lean, even in her baggy fire gear. "Footprints are over there," she said as he drew near, waving a hand to her left without taking her eyes off the pinyon she was studying. "I scanned them in, along with the tire tracks. See what you think."

Her voice was low and a bit scratchy—not the voice of a girl fresh out of college. And her fire gear bore traces of long use: nicks on the helmet, a worn look to the dark green trousers and bright yellow shirt, ground-in dirt on the boots. Okay, not a newbie. Just stupid, then. Ozzie detoured to his left and found the marks she had indicated.

"Tires are Michelin QX series," he told her, peering down at the prints and debating the wisdom of squatting for a closer look. The skin on the backs of his legs was still new and not very forgiving. "Popular for off-road vehicles manufactured since 2019. Shoes are more distinctive these days; this is a size ten Fleetfoot Trackhacker."

At that she turned and pushed back a pair of lightweight multifunction goggles she'd been gazing through. Like his own, they provided magnification, filters, shadow-enhanced monochrome, and infrared vision. It surprised Ozzie that she had a pair; district personnel didn't usually have that kind of equipment. It also surprised him to see the faint lines around her eyes and nose, the beginning of slackness in the skin along her jaw, the graying blond hair protruding in untidy wisps from beneath her hard hat. The woman had to be fifty, at least. "You ran the prints?" she asked.

Ozzie snorted. "No, I eyeballed them and came up with that. Of course, I ran the prints." The print-recognition database had produced product IDs almost instantly, and Ozzie had forwarded that information to officers at the hastily established roadblocks before he loaded it into IC-



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CARUS. They would be on the lookout for an ORV and a man with a cut in the left heel of his Fleetfoot Trackhackers.

Knowing he would regret it, Ozzie squatted down to examine the marks in the dust. Across the backs of his thighs and knees, new nerves shrieked at the unaccustomed strain, but he told himself it was just like physical therapy. In fact, it was a lot less painful than much of his physical therapy. "Just one person, you're right about that," he decided. "Scuffs his left foot when he walks. A big man, or else carrying a heavy pack." *Or a big woman, with a size ten foot.*

Ellison had come to stand behind him, looking over his shoulder at the tracks. "Flamethrower," she said.

Ozzie looked up, startled. "What?"

Her mouth quirked in amusement at his reaction, and suddenly Ozzie realized what he was dealing with: old-time Forest Service. They were all so damned arrogant, the old-timers, and they resented the hell out of the DWR. Nothing pleased them more than to make "Dee-Dubs," as they called them, look foolish.

*Not me, lady. I've paid my dues. Been to hell and lived to tell.*

"Carrying a flamethrower," the woman elaborated. "This guy wasn't the least bit subtle. No wimpy little cigarette lighter, or a match dropped in a thicket of dried sage." She waved a hand at the canopy of pines. "He went straight for the crowns."

*Fire in the crowns, tearing up the ravine toward them, and no safety zone, nowhere to run—*

Ozzie fought down a shudder and turned his attention back to the charred pinyon pine and the woman with the mocking blue eyes. A flamethrower— It was a terrorist tool. In 2007, they had hit eighteen National Forests and six National Parks in the western United States in a one-week period, using flamethrowers and Molotov cocktails. Over three million acres had burned, including whole towns. Fires in the suburbs of Denver had outstripped the supply of water to douse them, and a hundred thousand homes had burned. "That would be why you called for roadblocks," he guessed.

"Yup."

So maybe she wasn't stupid. Carefully, Ozzie straightened himself up, resisting the urge to shake out his legs to relieve the sensations crackling in his new skin. He was no taller than Ellison, but his shoulders were considerably broader, and he expanded his chest unconsciously to enhance the effect. He was in charge here now, and she had better understand that. "You knew when you called for roadblocks, they'd send in a DWR investigator." He pronounced it "Doo-Wer," the favored pronunciation in the Department itself.

Her smile broadened, surprising him. "Knew? I begged them to send you," she said cheerfully. "Do you know how hard it is to get roadblocks when your fire is eighteen hours old?"

Not stupid, then. Not stupid at all. But like most old-time rangers, she hadn't told him everything. ICCARUS was missing a few data, little things like, oh, a flamethrower. But what else? Why put up roadblocks when the perp was likely long gone?



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"This is where the fire started," she went on, turning back to the pine she'd been studying when he arrived. "You can see how the lower branches are incinerated." The lowest branches were fifteen feet above the ground; this patch of forest had been well-thinned, whether mechanically or by previous fires, and there were no shrubs or vines in the six-to-twelve-foot range. Fire could not have jumped from the surface to those lowest branches without intervening "ladder" fuels. "But the tree is so green, it didn't light off very well. The top is unburned.

"Some of the debris fell down here on the ground, though—" She pointed to the burned area around the base of the tree. "—and got a surface fire going. Must have been disappointing as hell for him, not to have these big trees go up like torches."

Ozzie surveyed the area carefully, with his own vision first, then with his goggles. The way the grass had fallen, the location of scorch marks and unburned patches, all supported her thesis. The surface fire had started here beneath the torched pinyon, and the southwesterly breeze had kept it from backing toward the road. He even agreed, reluctantly, with her suspicion that a flamethrower had been used on the pine; it was too green for lightning to have scorched it this way. Flame had been applied.

And the flame had spread. Driven by yesterday's brisk winds, it had moved into rough terrain and was now burning toward a campground and a dozen rental cabins. If firefighters couldn't stop it there, chances were good it would burn right up the canyon and threaten a four-star resort.

"If it was a terrorist," Ozzie said carefully, "why isn't he somewhere else starting more fires? There's been no jump in the number of initial attacks in this zone." Every response to a wildland fire was called an initial attack, even if the size-up team decided the fire should not be suppressed. "And no sign of coordination between this fire and others."

"It's not a terrorist," Ellison said flatly. "And he's not somewhere else because he's still here, somewhere. Maybe sitting up on that ridge." She waved a hand to the west. "Or on the mesa behind us. Watching his handiwork."

The hair on the back of Ozzie's neck lifted; she was awfully damn sure of herself. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

For a moment she chewed on her lip, the only hesitant behavior he had seen her display since he came. "Because I've seen this MO before," she said finally. "This guy's an arsonist, not a terrorist. He likes fire. He likes to watch."

*The flames were captivating: Nature's pyrotechnic display. Munching MREs— "Meals Ready to Eat"—the newbies watched gape-mouthed as gouts of red-orange flame churned into the air along the ridge. Some pulled digital cameras from their pockets and took snapshots. But then the wind shifted, and instead of spectators in the bleachers, they were suddenly center stage . . .*

Ozzie rubbed his neck to erase the chill and switched his goggles from infrared to enhanced-shadow monochrome as he went back to study the tracks again, this time following their route. The perp had torched sever-



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al trees, trying to enlarge the fire. His scuffed footprints were around the trunks, and then he went—where? Back to his vehicle, which he had parked off the road, under a juniper. Hiding from the satellites? He could have saved himself the trouble. By the time the fire registered on Firebird, and it signaled Scooter to move in for a closer look, the perp could have been well down the road, lost among the other vehicles that traversed the forest. A terrorist would have hit and run, hoping to start another fire further up the road to complicate matters, or maybe get to another forest and start one there. But if Ellison was right . . .

Ozzie tapped the interface in the sleeve of his brush jacket to activate it, then called up the first satellite photos. Zeroing in on the point of origin, he struggled to make out fine detail on the three-inch by four-inch screen. The image was grainy, but it was possible the gray blur near this juniper was a vehicle. He transferred the image directly to his goggles, hoping for better resolution. It appeared in holographic form, floating eighteen inches in front of his face.

"Looks like he might have been here still at—" Ozzie called up the date/time stamp, "—1515 hours." He pushed back his goggles again and checked his sleeve interface for the time of the next photo. Fifteen-thirty. He loaded it, but the gray blur under the juniper was conspicuously absent. "Gone by 1530," he reported.

He went back to the first picture, but the object was still just a blur to him. A good technician with high resolution equipment might be able to get a car class on the vehicle, though, if not a make and model. He commed his office. "Doris, give this photo I'm sending you to Grayson, see if he can identify the vehicle in it." Two clicks, and the image was on its way.

When he looked up, he found Ellison grinning at him. "That's what I like about you Doo-Wer boys," she said. "You've got the greatest toys."

Ellison herself wore a radio pack on her chest, the same kind the Forest Service had been using twenty-one years ago during the terrorist fires. That concerted attack had bankrupted the Forest Service, and while Congress had passed an emergency appropriation to aid the 150,000 homeowners affected by the disaster, it had balked at covering the tab for fighting the blazes. The Federal agencies involved were expected to cover that out of their existing budgets. National Park Service programs had been compromised for years afterwards by the expense, but the Forest Service had been crippled. Forests throughout the west were closed, their trails and lakes and campgrounds placed off-limits. Three-quarters of the personnel were laid off, with only 25 percent being hired back as contract employees at reduced wages. Forest health and forest rehabilitation went by the wayside; only programs that generated revenue were staffed: grazing leases, mineral leases, salvage logging. Fire suppression was impossible, and in 2008 another rash of devastating fires—these just the normal run of lightning- and human-caused fires that could not be suppressed—raised an uproar from the general public to do something. Stop the fires. Fix the Forest Service.

So Congress, in its infinite wisdom, had created the Department of Wildland Resources, the DWR, by taking land management agencies



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away from the Department of Interior, and the Forest Service away from the Department of Agriculture. The new agency was to be both more economical and more streamlined by eliminating duplication of functions and improving communication between units. Ozzie had joined them twelve years ago, coming over from the Fish and Wildlife Service, and so far he hadn't seen much of economy or improved communications. The National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife resented the Forest Service for soaking up dollars that should have been theirs; the Forest Service resented the other agencies for being better staffed and better equipped; and they all resented the Department of Wildland Resources for scraping the cream off the budget dollars and decking out their personnel with the latest electronic gadgets while a Recreation Specialist trying to repair a hiking trail had to get no less than seven approvals to purchase a can of chainsaw lubricant.

And here Ozzie was, leaving a desk loaded with contracts and biodiversity reports to investigate a fire, when the investigator on the scene already had it figured out, and with less sophisticated equipment than Ozzie had. How was that less redundant?

"How long you been fighting fire?" he asked.

"Since oh-three," she replied with the casual aplomb of a veteran. "What's that, twenty-four years? Yeah, twenty-four years."

She had been in the thick of it, then, cutting her teeth on the devastating fires of 2003 and 2004, trying futilely to stem the terrorist fires in 2007, hanging on through the hard times that followed with no budget and no resources. Ozzie had been in elementary school when Carol Ellison first went to work on the firelines. "How many have you investigated?" he wanted to know.

Her answer was a shrug and a hollow-voiced, "Too many, I guess."

Great. And they sent *him* to check up on *her*.

"What is it about this guy makes you think you've seen his work before?" he asked.

Ellison fished something out of her pocket and handed it to him. "This." It was a candy wrapper. Ozzie smoothed it out enough to see what kind. "Peppermint patty," she said, though he could read that himself. "This guy likes to enjoy the cool blast of refreshing mint while he watches the hot blast of the inferno he's created."

*Stopping for lunch, peeling the wrapper off a granola bar, watching the fire on the ridgeline above them. But then suddenly it was behind them, too—oh, God, how had it jumped across the ravine?—and then it was backing down both sides toward them, and tearing up the draw from Kettle Creek, roaring with the voice of hell—*

"That's all you've got, a candy wrapper?" he growled.

"Yup." She took it back from him, folded it neatly and tucked it into her pocket again. "I've seen it twice before: he makes himself a little nest, high up on a ridge, settles in with sodas and snacks. First time, we stumbled across it by accident: Coke cans, chip bags—" She patted her pocket. "Candy wrappers. And the gas can he'd used to start the fire—I suppose he didn't want to pack that out with him. The second time, I followed his tire tracks. He was sitting in his jeep, watching the excitement; I got with-



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in twenty yards of him before he waved and took off. I called for a roadblock, but in those days . . ." She shook her head. "He left a drip torch behind, along with the cans and candy wrappers. Mailed us a letter afterwards, told us which engine company he'd stolen it from."

Her voice was calm, glazed with irony, but Ozzie's stomach churned at the thought of a drip torch—a fireman's tool for starting backfires—being used to set a forest ablaze. The sour taste of smoke in his mouth was suddenly oppressive, and he had to fight the urge to spit. If Ellison was right, if the perp was somewhere close by . . . He eyed the western ridge and wet his lips. "You call law enforcement about this?"

She laughed. "Oh, hell, Ozzie, Dispatch isn't going to call in an LEO on my say-so. That's for you Doo-Wer boys, not a lowly Fuels Specialist like me."

He reached for his sleeve interface.

"And the last time I tried to convince my supervisor a candy wrapper meant a serial arsonist," she continued, "I got posted to the back of nowhere for three years, shuffling papers."

Ozzie hesitated. A glance at Ellison showed that while her tone might be an easy drawl, her eyes glittered with checked anger. Ozzie knew what it was like to suffer a supervisor's displeasure. And if she was wrong about this—hell, if she was right but they couldn't prove it—he would be the one taking the heat, not her. A candy wrapper was awfully thin evidence, especially since he hadn't seen the records on those previous fires. How did he know she was giving it to him straight? Why hadn't ICCARUS picked up on the pattern? If he called in law enforcement, adding to the expense of this fire, and it turned out the candy wrapper was a coincidence . . .

Ellison was staring off at the western ridge. "You got one of those ICCARUS units in your truck, Ozzie?" she asked casually.

"Yeah, I've got one," he admitted.

Her grin was back, but now Ozzie recognized it for what it was: a mask over an old and bitter wound. "Suppose we could call up the action on that ridge over there?" she asked, nodding to the west.

Ozzie tried to imagine what ICCARUS might show him that would be of any use. Satellite photos on file could contribute a photo of the area, but it couldn't show what was under the trees. The fuel density, fuel types, and fuel moisture levels would all be indicated by colors and patterns, but that wouldn't help them spot a human being. The infrared . . . "Mind telling me what you hope to see?" he asked.

"I hope to get lucky," she said cheerfully. "I'm hoping Scooter caught him crossing from his car to the rocks up there, or maybe the infrared will pick up residual heat from his flamethrower."

"Not after eighteen hours!" Ozzie protested.

"Naw, this would be historical footage," she agreed. "You can call up the historicals, can't you?"

"Of course." Ozzie started back toward his truck, and Ellison fell in beside him. It wouldn't hurt to show her what ICCARUS had generated, but he couldn't help feeling there was more to her agenda than a wild hope to spot the perpetrator on snapshots taken at fifteen-minute inter-



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vals. After the first hour, the interval would have increased to six hours, just sufficient to monitor fire spread.

"Don't suppose you could request a current satellite photo of that area," she said.

Now she was pushing it. "If I feel it's warranted," he hedged. The Forest Service might think the DWR was made of money, but Ozzie's supervisor didn't share the opinion. Why spend money on a satellite photo when a lead plane could fly over the area and get the information they needed? Of course, to get that, they would have to convince the Incident Commander on this fire it was necessary. Ozzie knew the IC; it was going to take more than a candy wrapper.

When they reached the truck, Ozzie lifted out the ICCARUS unit and set it up on the hood where they could both see it. The first thing that came up was the overview of the Matchless Fire; the image updated in real time, as new data was added, and Ozzie winced to see how close the fire was getting to the campground. The facilities there had been rebuilt only four years ago, having been destroyed in the terrorist fires of 2007. He touched the menu button, selected "status," then touched the screen at the point of the campground. A blowup of the area appeared, along with figures summarizing fire activity, weather conditions, fuel conditions, the number and kinds of crews and equipment deployed in the area, and the objectives of the command team for that location.

Ellison gave a low whistle. "You know, when I started with the Outfit," she drawled, using an insider's term for the Forest Service, "infrared was a Type 1 resource. Now look."

The naked envy in her voice made Ozzie self-conscious. "Now you're walking around with infrared on your head," he observed, tapping the screen to bring back the overview.

She put a hand to her goggles. "What, these? Had to buy these myself."

That explained it. It also said something about Ellison, that she was willing to shell out her own money to have better tools. Seasonal firefighters had to purchase their own gear, of course, from fire-resistant clothing to fire shelters, and Agency firefighters had to take theirs out of their uniform allowance; but multi-function goggles were a tool, like a shovel or a pulaski, and no one was expected to buy his or her own. They were also expensive; it wasn't like buying one of the newer, better fire shelters . . .

*"Deploy!" someone shouted as they raced up the ravine, losing ground to the flames. He could see the newbie in front of him groping for the plastic case at the small of her back, stopping to rip it open and snatch out the aluminum and fiberglass shelter that was supposed to protect her from the radiant heat, supposed to trap breathable air inside with her. It was one of the new shelters, but Ozzie's was old, it hadn't been out of its case in the fifteen years he'd owned it. He reached for it, but was afraid to stop running; there was no cleared area, the ravine was full of fuels, and if he deployed here, there would be dry grass under him. It would bring the fire to his shelter, let it inside. So he kept running—*

"Ozzie? You okay?"

He came back with a start. "Yeah, fine," he lied. He tapped the IC-



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CARUS screen where the image of the western ridge appeared; but before the enlarged picture resolved, it occurred to him that he had never introduced himself to Carol Ellison, and yet she had called him by name just now. She knew who he was. That meant she knew what had happened to him. The gaze he turned on her was cold. "I don't remember telling you my name."

"Didn't have to." She grinned, a smug grin this time. "I asked for you."

"By name?" Why would she do that?

Her eyes measured him a moment before she answered, "I figured you know more about fire than most."

Most DWR agents, she meant. The DWR had a reputation for being administrative in nature, for shunning field work. So she had asked for the one guy she knew had worked the firelines. After the Drover Fire, it was a name every firefighter in the area knew.

"You know, that chip on your shoulder doesn't interest me in the least, so you might as well stick it in your pocket," she advised him. "That's where I keep mine. Carol Ellison," she introduced, pulling off a glove and offering her hand. "Call me Ellie."

The sight of that hand jarred Ozzie, even as her nickname rang a bell. Her palm and fingers were gnarled by old, white scar tissue—burn scars, scars incurred before medical technology could grow replacement skin from a person's own cells, when grafts had to be taken from other parts of her body— Of course: the Flintlock Fire, in 2010. The crew that got burned over on Kingfisher Ridge. The only survivor.

*The man in front of Ozzie was deploying his shelter; feet and hands in the corner straps, he stretched it like a sail in the howling wind, then fell to the ground, pulling the flaps in under him. Ozzie detoured around him, but he knew it was now or never. He had to deploy. There were still patches of grass here, but not as much. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. Maybe he wouldn't take any fire in his shelter—*

Ozzie withdrew his own glove and clasped Ellie's hand firmly, but gently. The scar tissue was an odd texture, lumpy but almost slick, and it made his stomach churn. "Oswaldo Mendoza," he said, refusing to shy away from the sensation. "But I guess you knew that." There was suddenly a kinship between them that could not be denied. Sole survivors. Was that why she had asked for him, by name?

When he drew his hand back, Ellie Ellison lifted hers and regarded the deep scars as though they were a soot smudge or a berry stain she had just noticed. "I was cold trailing," she said absently, referring to the mop-up technique of running a bare hand through the ashes of a fire to make sure there were no hotspots. "Had my right glove off. Then I looked up at the sky, and something wet hit my cheek. I was afraid a bird got me, so I pulled off my left glove, too, and wiped at my face with my clean hand." She pulled off her left glove now, to display the same kind of scars. "It was rain," she said simply. "That's when I knew."

What Ellie had known was that the smoke plume from the fire was about to collapse. It had risen thousands of feet into the atmosphere until it ran into a cold layer of air that caused the moisture in it to condense and fall back to earth as scattered raindrops. Only a few made it through



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the superheated air over the fire to fall on the hands and faces of firefighters, but Ellie had recognized them as harbingers of disaster.

She had shouted to her crew boss, who radioed Dispatch, then told his crew to pull back to their van, just in case. He didn't think there was any rush. They were climbing an unburned hillside, a shortcut back to the van, when they saw the fire coming. Pushed by the microburst winds of the collapsing plume, it jumped from treetop to treetop through a canopy left untouched by the earlier surface fire. Some tried to outrun it; others opened their tent-like shelters and fell to the ground where they were on the slope. Ellie, who had been more alarmed than her crew boss and had trotted ahead of the others, made it over the crest of the hill before she deployed hers. When flames invaded her sanctuary, she had beaten them out with her ungloved hands. There on the lee side of the hill, where the convective heat of the fire's leading edge had rolled over her and toxic gases had not forced their way into her shelter, she had survived.

Now she pulled her gloves back on over the grisly reminders of her ordeal. "Stupid," she said with a trace of smile that belied the pain in her eyes. "To this day I can't remember what I did with those gloves. Must have dropped them. So, can we see historicals of that ridge now?"

Unnerved, Ozzie turned back to ICCARUS and tapped the screen several times to bring up the latest satellite view of the western ridge, as opposed to the composite now showing. The ridge was thick with trees on the east, but only sparsely vegetated on the west with a two-track road leading up toward the crest from that direction. At the top, a rock outcrop protruded, angled toward the east and broken by numerous fissures that could easily conceal a human being. The resolution was better on ICCARUS than on his sleeve interface, but it was still grainy. Even with maximum magnification, Ozzie couldn't see anything noteworthy.

Patiently, he began to go back through the historicals. They were sketchy; there had been no reason to photograph this ridge, so there was only what was incidental to capturing the fire. But just before sundown last night, the lead plane doing size-up had snapped one photo, and there was a dot on the two-track road.

Ozzie put full magnification on the dot; it was still just a dot. Someone or something had been on that road at 1823 last night, but it was impossible to say if it was a man or a bear, a vehicle or an elk. He looked at Ellie.

Her face was blank, devoid of even her masking smile. What was she thinking? What was she feeling?

"Want to take a drive?" she asked.

A candy wrapper, and a dot on an aerial photo. He could get law enforcement out here on his authority, but how long would it take? And if he was wrong . . . "Is it always the same kind of candy wrapper?" he asked.

"Yeah. Always the same." She waited patiently as he deliberated.

"And it was just two other fires?"

"That I know of. One other I strongly suspect. But you can bet he's set others; just somebody else did the investigation and missed the clues." She shifted her weight, and Ozzie sensed the tension she worked so carefully to conceal. "We can take my green rig," she offered, indicating the Forest Service pickup.



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She wanted this guy. He had taunted her, cost her three years on someone's shit list, and it was personal. She wanted him to be on that ridge now. But was he? "Wouldn't hurt to get up a little closer," Ozzie admitted. He closed up ICCARUS and tucked it under his arm.

As they left the point of origin, the smell of smoke faded but did not vanish. It was on his clothes now, in his hair, and like a ghost it continued to haunt his senses.

"You still have nightmares?" Ellie asked as they bounced over the forest road to the western side of the ridge.

"Yeah. You?"

"Not in a couple years. Doesn't mean I won't have one tonight."

They started up the zigzag track toward the crest of the ridge. Ozzie tried to phrase his question. "Do you— Do you ever—feel like *yourself* again?"

"It's a new you." She took the truck expertly around a four-foot pine sapling growing up in the middle of the track. "The first time you were born of water, the second time of fire. You start right there, start over."

*Learning to walk again, learning to control newly-grown muscles commanded by newly-grown nerves—*

"There."

They were about a hundred yards from the crest of the ridge; Ellie brought the truck to a stop and pointed off through the trees to the left. "There it is."

On the far side of a thick-trunked juniper, with its nose pointed downhill, was a late-model off-road vehicle, black and coated with dust. Ozzie's stomach did a quick pirouette. "That was a hell of a lucky guess," he breathed.

"Now, don't you make light of my detective work," Ellie chided as she deftly maneuvered her pickup to sit sideways across the dirt track, blocking the road. "I told you, I know how this guy thinks. So, shall we go have a look in that ORV?" Without waiting for an answer, she opened her door and climbed out.

Ozzie hesitated. They didn't have a search warrant, but that didn't mean they couldn't peer inside the vehicle. If they saw anything suspicious, he could request law enforcement and a tele-warrant. He really didn't have the authority for this kind of action, and neither did Ellie. Unlike park rangers, who were all law enforcement officers, Forest Service employees had no powers of arrest and were forbidden to carry firearms.

But Ellie was hiking determinedly toward the ORV, and Ozzie figured he'd better go with her.

The trees were thin here, but the grass was thick, nurtured by spring rains and dried by summer's heat to the finest tinder Mother Nature could provide. *He could feel the bunch grass through the floor of his fire shelter, knew he was lying on dry fuels, with more dry fuels around him. The tiny tent of aluminum and fiberglass construction would deflect 95 percent of radiant heat, but it would burn if exposed to direct flame. Still, it was the only hope Ozzie had, for the temperature outside would be well over a thousand degrees; a single breath could kill him—*



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Ozzie labored to catch up with Ellie, his knees and ankles working stiffly, the new skin and muscle around them still not as flexible as he wished. "What do you expect to find?" he asked, only a little winded.

She laughed, scarcely seeming to breathe hard. "A flamethrower!"

"You think he's that stupid, to leave a flamethrower out where we can see it?"

"No, I think he's that brazen." She stopped to face Ozzie, and her mask slipped, exposing the naked anger beneath. "He's taunting us, Ozzie. He's daring us to catch him. He's been making fools of us for seventeen years, and he gets bolder with every fire. I got within yards of him last time: he laughed at me. He thinks this is funny."

Seventeen years . . . A chill ran through Ozzie as he made the connection. "He set the Flintlock Fire?" The one Ellie had survived—

"I can't prove it," she admitted. "But I saw the evidence bag, stuff they picked up at the point of origin. A box of matches. A half-burned newspaper." She drew a measured breath. "A mint patty wrapper."

Now she started toward the ORV again, and Ozzie fell into step beside her. "I remembered that wrapper eight years later," she told him, "when I was investigating the Ponchito Fire. When I saw the same kind of wrapper at the point of origin, and in the trash from his nest. I tried to point out a connection and got my butt busted for it, reassigned to a desk up at Happy Jack. Some big-shot Dee-Dub wanted to write it up as a terror attack, hoping to get more money for his zone. That's why I got so close to this guy the second time. If I caught him, there wouldn't be any question."

They had reached the vehicle, but Ozzie caught her arm. "We're not going to catch this guy," he said bluntly. "If we see anything suspicious, we're calling for law enforcement."

Ellie grinned disarmingly. "Sure. That's why I brought you along, so you could request law enforcement. They'll listen to you."

Something about that didn't ring right, but Ozzie couldn't tell what. He let go of her. "All right, let's have a look."

The first thing he checked was the tires on the ORV; they were Michelin QXs, no surprise, with fairly new tread. The side and rear windows of the vehicle were lightly tinted, a token shield against the Arizona sun. Ozzie looked in through the tailgate. A gasoline can was clearly visible.

But it wasn't illegal to carry a gas can. If you traveled long distances in the back country, or if you pulled a boat with your rig—

"Over here," Ellie called.

A flamethrower lay on the ground by the front wheel.

"Looks like he was planning to leave it behind," she said, her nonchalant drawl back in place. "Kind of hard to get past the roadblocks with it, I suppose."

Ozzie's mind rebelled. It was too convenient, too pat. Criminals didn't leave huge clues like this. Or did they? What Ozzie knew of criminals was more from movies and television than from personal experience. Maybe they *were* just that stupid. Or maybe, as Ellie suggested, this guy was thumbing his nose at them.

Here near the top of the ridge, treetops rustled in the gentle south-



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westerly breeze. *Wind in the trees, and the roar of the fire on the ridge—*

"I'll run the license plate," Ozzie said, reaching to activate his sleeve interface.

But Ellie caught his wrist with her gloved hand. "Before you do that," she said quietly.

His nerves quaking, he looked into her pale blue eyes; they were so clear and level and cold they transfixed him.

"You know what'll happen," she said. "By the time they get out here, he'll have spotted us. He may be watching us right now." She nodded toward the crest of the ridge above them, where the rock outcropping kept the trees at bay. "He'll high-tail it down the other side of this ridge, or maybe run past us right here. Which of us is going to catch him? You?"

Ozzie knew he would be doing well to manage a painful trot. He looked toward the rocky crest. "You think he's up there?"

"I know he is."

"Know?" His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "You *know?*" Then it dawned on him. The goggles. "You saw him up here, didn't you? Before I even arrived."

One corner of her mouth twitched upward. "He stood up to take a leak." Her hand touched the goggles, resting now above the rim of her helmet. "I had full magnification on, hoping to spot him."

"Why didn't you call for law enforcement?" Ozzie demanded, knowing he had been set up, not knowing why. "What did you expect *me* to do?"

"I can't let him get away," Ellie said evenly. "I can't risk it. I needed the roadblocks: that meant I had to have a Doo-Wer. So I wanted one who knew what it was like."

"What *what* was like?"

"What it's like to burn!" she snarled, her composure gone, ripped away like a fire shelter caught in tornado-force winds. "What it's like to feel your lungs sear, to know death is reaching for you!"

*Holding the acrid air in his lungs, knowing it held no oxygen, knowing the next breath would be worse, knowing he was going to die—*

"To feel your flesh burning, to know the pain, and know there's not a damned thing you can do but take it!"

*Beating at the flames inside the shelter with his gloved hands—but he couldn't reach the fire at his feet, couldn't do anything about it. Nowhere to go, and nothing to do but scream, burn and scream, and scream, and scream—*

Her voice dropped. "I've got a drip torch in my toolkit," she said, nodding back toward the pickup. "We could start over there, to the north, and lay a line of fire to the road here, just like a backfire. Cut him off. The incline will carry the fire up to him."

"Are you nuts?" Ozzie blurted, horrified.

"It'll die out on the other side," she went on. "It's all rock over there, too steep for much to grow—too steep for him to climb down."

He stared at her, hoping she was joking, but she wasn't. "You *are* nuts!"

"Did you see the others?" Her voice was hollow, the voice of someone else. "When you came out of your shelter, did you see the rest of your crew?"



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*Little blankets of blackened aluminum peeled back, and here and there the glimpse of a hunched up figure—*

"No," he lied. "I was in bad shape. They put me on morphine right away, carried me out on a litter."

"I saw every one of them," she breathed, her voice barely audible over the rustle of tree limbs, the whine of the wind. "Before the rescue team got there. I shouted at them first, begging one, just one of them, to be alive. I tore away the shelters with my burned hands. I found the ones who tried to run."

*Screams piercing the din, desperate voices shrieking for God's attention, and then the roar of the fire blotting it all out—*

"Let him know how it feels," she hissed. "He likes fire so much, let him know how it feels to be trapped. To see the fire coming for you, and not be able to do anything about it."

*Cut off from their safety zone by fire that shouldn't have been there. Racing the dragon, knowing they must lose, knowing it was all going to end here—*

"No," Ozzie croaked harshly. "I won't do that to anybody. Not even him."

For a moment her face twisted in anguish; then she leaned in close to him, as though to keep her words from the trees that rattled their branches overhead. "Do you know who started your fire?"

Ozzie's heart contracted in his chest. No. No, that was too much. They'd kept him in a drug-induced coma for months while his body tried to heal, while it fought infection, while they grew new skin and stimulated new muscle cells. But when he came out of it, when he came back to a world hazy from pain and medication, they had told him the Drover Fire was caused by a campfire that got out of control. A campfire—not a maniac with a drip torch.

"You're sick," he grated. "I'm calling for law enforcement." Turning away from her, he tapped his sleeve interface to life with a shaking hand. "Doris, get law enforcement to this lat-long." The chip in his sleeve would supply the latitude and longitude; Ozzie doubted he could read it from a map just now. "We may have the perp up on this ridge. I need you to run a license plate, too; we found a vehicle up here, and a flamethrower—"

The slam of the pickup's tailgate jerked him around, and he saw Ellie striding toward the ridge with a rifle in one hand. "Hey!" he shouted, ambling painfully back toward the green rig. "Ellie!"

"Stay out of my way, Dee-Dub!" she shouted back.

"Are you crazy?" Ozzie forced his reluctant limbs to work harder, faster. "Come back here!"

"I'm tired of him being at the point of origin. I'm going to make this his point of termination."

Ozzie nearly tripped over a tree root, but caught himself and kept going. "Is that worth throwing your life away?" he demanded. "They'll send you up for murder."

"I'll plead insanity."

"And spend the rest of your days in a mental institution?" His calves were shrieking, they felt like they were burning all over again.

"Why should you care?" Ellie picked up her pace as he drew near.



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"Why should I care?" Ozzie didn't know. She was crazy, certifiable, and maybe she ought to be locked up; but she'd already done time in an eighty-six-inch by thirty-one-inch by fifteen-and-a-half-inch fire shelter. He felt drained, dizzy; but with one last burst of effort, he launched himself at her knees in a classic football tackle.

Ellie went down with a cry of surprise. Then she began to struggle, but Ozzie kept his grasp on her legs until he could catch one flailing arm and wrench it around behind her. She was strong, but she was no match for him; the muscles in his arms and chest were well-seasoned, and he kept her pinned. Finally she surrendered and lay panting on the dirt. In the stillness of the forest's murmuring, he heard her begin to sob.

Two sheriff's deputies arrived about forty minutes later. Ellie was calm and coherent by that time, and her unsanctioned rifle had disappeared back into the long toolbox in the bed of the green rig. The deputies inspected the ORV, which had been reported stolen in Pinetop three days earlier; they photographed the flamethrower, conferred with Ozzie, and then fanned out to approach the rock outcrop at the crest of the ridge.

"He'll be gone," Ellie said glumly, crouched in the shade of an Apache pine.

"Yeah, I know." Ozzie had ICCARUS set up on the hood of the pickup and was watching the fire's progress. He had been watching it off and on for the last thirty minutes. It was mesmerizing.

"All they'll find is his nest: soda cans, chip bags, candy wrappers."

"Yup." The wind had pushed flames into the campground; as the screen refreshed, he watched the portable outhouses buckle and melt, watched the fee station blaze up.

"And in a couple years, he'll be back to start another one."

The screen refreshed again, and the fire had jumped to a cluster of picnic tables. "Not this time," Ozzie said.

Ellie lifted her drooping head to turn suspicious eyes on him.

"I got him on the bird," Ozzie told her. "Filed the request almost as soon as you stopped kicking. Scooter's been taking pictures of this ridge and the surrounding area once every two minutes for the past half hour. The perp took off when he saw the first sheriff's unit turn onto the control road, about twenty minutes ago. He's headed north—looks like there's a hiking trail up there that leads back down to FR 66. A Forest LEO and a half dozen deputies are closing in on it now. Here, you want to see?" He brought ICCARUS over to where she sat and eased himself onto the ground beside her, ignoring the protest from his rebuilt calves.

Ellie stared at the screen as he toggled from the fire to the satellite photos showing the perp's ragged trek off the ridge. Finally she smiled. It was a wan and weary smile, a mere shadow of her former grin, but it warmed Ozzie's heart. "That's what I like about you Doo-Wer boys," she said, watching the law enforcement officers move into place near the trail's end. "You've got the greatest toys." O



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# BOTTOM FEEDING

Tim Pratt

**Tim Pratt's story "Hart and Boot" (*Polyphony 4*) will be reprinted in the 2005 *Best American Short Stories* anthology. His first novel, *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl*, will be published by Bantam in December. Tim is an editor at *Locus*, who has lost both a Nebula and a Campbell Award. He lives in Oakland with his fiancée, Heather Shaw. They co-edit a little 'zine called *Flytrap*. "Bottom Feeding" marks his first fiction appearance in *Asimov's*.**

Graydon sat in a lawn chair beneath a bedraggled weeping willow, by the pond where Shiteater lived. A canvas grocery bag rested in the mud on his left, bulging with his most prized possessions, carefully chosen that morning—a mason jar filled with smooth stones and sea glass that he'd gathered during childhood summers at the beach house; the copy of *Watership Down* his brother Alton had been reading before he died, tattered bookmark still in place; a twist of braided blonde hair Rebekah had given him to remember her by, the summer she went off to Ireland and met Lorrie; the program from the first play he'd ever directed in college. All the things he was finished with. All the things he had to trade.

Graydon sipped strong coffee from his thermos, and watched the sun begin its day's climb up from the east. Graydon had been here for an hour already, mostly in the dark. He was crying a little, off and on, almost absent-mindedly.

A loaded spear gun lay across his lap, bought two days before at a sporting-goods superstore in Atlanta for more money than Graydon had expected. The clerk had asked where he was going fishing, and Graydon said "A pond behind my house." The clerk had laughed, thinking it was a joke, and gone over the basics of handling the speargun with Graydon, who'd never used anything more complicated than a rod and reel before.

"All right, then," Graydon said, wiping tears away from his cheeks. He lifted the speargun in one hand and the canvas bag of treasures in the other. He waded into the murky green water, up to his waist, and upend-



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ed the bag upon the waters. The braided hair floated, as did the book and program, their pages darkening with water, but the full mason jar sank, ripples spreading around it.

A light rain fell, making more ripples, and thunder rumbled. Those were good omens for this kind of fishing.

"There's your bait," Graydon said. "Come on, Shiteater." He held the speargun as the clerk had shown him, and waited for the thing he hunted to swim up from the depths.

The salmon of knowledge lived a long time ago, in the Well of Segais, where the waters ran deep and clear as rippling air. He swam there, thinking his deep thoughts, coming to the surface occasionally to eat the magical hazelnuts that fell into the water from the trees on the bank. Every nut contained revelations, but the salmon was not a mere living compendium of knowledge—he was a wise fish, too, and so chose to live quietly, waiting for the inevitable day when he would be caught and devoured. The salmon dimly remembered past (and perhaps future) lives, experiences inside and outside of time, from the whole history of the land: being blinded by a hawk on a cold winter night, hiding in a cave after a flood, running from a woman who might have been a goddess, or who might have been a witch.

The salmon did not look forward to being caught, and cooked, and eaten, but knowing what the consequences would be for the one who caught him, he had to laugh, insofar as fish (even very wise ones) are able to laugh.

Graydon started fishing the summer after he got kicked out of college. Lacking any other direction, still stunned by his brother's sudden death, Graydon had returned to his hometown of Pomegranate Grove, Georgia, and rented a two-bedroom house with a fireplace on the edge of town. He had a spare room full of Alton's things, as he was the sole inheritor—their father was long dead, their mother in a nursing home, victim of early-onset senile dementia. Every day Graydon sorted through the piles of his dead brother's things, touching objects both familiar and foreign, and one day he found a rod, reel, and tackle box. He and Alton had gone fishing often when they were children, and suddenly that seemed like the proper monument, a way to honor Alton's memory and simultaneously pass the empty days, so Graydon made a lunch and took the rod and tackle out back, to the pond by the woods behind his house. It wasn't much of a pond, maybe thirty feet across at its widest, with a few reeds in the shallows and one big weeping willow close to the water. These ponds could be deep, though, and it wasn't trash-strewn or visibly polluted, so he thought there might be fish.

Graydon sat on the bank and put a flashy red-and-yellow lure on the hook. Probably all wrong for whatever kind of fish lived in this pond, if any, but he didn't care if he caught anything—he just wanted to sit, and think, and hold the pole, and watch the red-and-white bobber float. That's what fishing was about, he recalled. Actually catching anything was sort of an optional extra.

He cast the line out into the middle of the pond and settled down with his back against the willow tree, thinking about Alton, who'd taught him



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how to climb trees, and cheat at poker, and, when they were older, how to take a hit off a bong. Graydon hadn't used any of those skills in a long time. Alton had taught him to fish, too, though neither one of them had ever been any good at it. Graydon wondered if the two of them had ever fished in this particular pond, and couldn't remember—it was possible, as they'd tried little fishing holes all over Pomegranate Grove.

The bobber sank under the green surface of the pond, and the rod moved in Graydon's hands. He reeled the line in slowly, wondering what kind of fish had been fooled by the flashy lure, but whatever had snagged on the hook didn't move like a fish, or like anything alive. Something dark and round broke the surface, as big as a human head but smooth and shining. Graydon reeled it in the rest of the way and bent over the water to fish it out.

He'd caught a motorcycle helmet, a black one with a star-shaped crack on one side. The line was tangled around the chin strap, and Alton's flashy red-and-yellow lure was gone.

Graydon turned the helmet over and let the water run out of it, into the pond.

Alton had died in a motorcycle accident, had lost control and smashed into a guardrail on a bridge, then gone flying off the bike into the shallow swamp-water below. He'd landed face-down, probably knocked unconscious, and though his head struck a rock in the water, the blow didn't kill him—the helmet had protected his skull. Instead, Alton had died by drowning in two feet of water.

Graydon touched the star-shaped crack, then threw the helmet violently back into the pond. Remembrance was one thing, but pulling up something like that was too morbid by half. The helmet hit the water and floated, open-end-up, like a little plastic boat.

Something broke the surface of the water, mud-brown and slickly shining. It was a catfish, the biggest Graydon had ever seen. Its huge head stayed out of the water for a long moment, teacup-sized black eyes staring at Graydon. Long whiskers sprouted from around its mouth in nasty profusion. The catfish dove under the water again with a flip of its stubby fins, then re-emerged beside the floating helmet, its gaping fish-mouth open wide enough to swallow a basketball.

The fish ate the helmet in one bite, and disappeared beneath the ripples.

Graydon whistled. He'd heard of catfish that big—they were the stuff of Southern rural legend. Huge catfish, decades old, and when they were finally caught and cut open, all sorts of things were found in their bellies. If this fish was big enough to eat a motorcycle helmet . . . well. Graydon wasn't going to catch a fish like that with Alton's old rod and reel. There was little chance of catching it at *all*. That fish was older than him by many years, probably, and had doubtless outwitted scores of better fishermen.

Still, that would be something, wouldn't it? Catching something so big, so old, so wily. Even if he didn't succeed, it would be fun trying.

And just like that, Graydon had a goal for the summer.

Here are some things that have been found inside the bellies of large catfish in the American South:



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License plates, diamond rings, steel buckets, beer bottles, lugnuts, picture frames, doorknobs, alarm clocks, boots, credit cards, stolen hotel ashtrays, rubber duckies, cowbells, candles, dinner plates, floppy canvas fisherman's hats, spectacles, wallets with money still inside, one-armed Teddy bears, other fish, snapping turtles, spark plugs, toy pistols, hubcaps, wheelbarrow tires, coffee cups, thermoses, roofing shingles, human hands, telephones, and screwdrivers.

Here are some things that have never been found inside the bellies of large catfish in the American South:

Solace. Hope. Lost ideals. True love. Things that smell nice. Glory. Everything you ever dreamed of having, but never received. A reason to go on living.

On Friday, the week he started fishing, Graydon drove into Atlanta to have coffee with his oldest and most bewildering friend, Rebekah.

Graydon arrived at the Pelican Café first, and took a table by the windows, beneath an art student's painting of sinister mermaids fencing with human thighbones. He ordered a glass of chardonnay and sipped it, thinking of catfish, mostly, until Rebekah showed up, only fifteen minutes late, her honey-colored hair knotted in a profusion of small and not very tidy braids. She wore white shorts that showed off her legs and a pale-yellow blouse, open at the throat. Graydon had adjusted to the situation with Rebekah long enough ago that he no longer felt a pang at her loveliness, but he still noticed it. They'd grown up together in Pomegranate Grove and dated briefly, in high school, before Rebekah met Lorrie and realized she was a lesbian. After a few bumpy months following that revelation, the two of them had become friends again, though Graydon still had trouble warming up to Lorrie, with her sharp features and her New Age affectations, her astrology and proselytizing vegetarianism.

Rebekah apologized for being late—she might as well apologize for being Rebekah, Graydon thought—and spread her things out on the table. Textbooks, a notebook, hi-liters, pens, a cup of coffee, a bottle of beer, all squeezing Graydon onto a tiny edge of the table, with barely room for his wineglass. Rebekah's things always expanded to fill the available space, and her personality did much the same.

"How's life?" Graydon asked.

Rebekah shrugged. "Schoolwise, I'm getting fluent in old English, for what that's worth. Chaucer's never been funnier. The freshmen I'm teaching are functionally illiterate, and the professor I'm TA'ing for is more interested in my T & A than my ideas. Lorrie's gone from vegetarian to vegan, and if I see another bean sprout I'm going to scream. I've been sneaking out to eat cheeseburgers for months now, and I'm getting tired of living a dietary lie. Lorrie says my aura's getting all black and spiky, which I figure can't be good. But mostly I'm too busy to worry about how I'm doing." She smiled brightly. "You?"

"I've been fishing," he said, and told her about catching the helmet and seeing the catfish, though he hadn't seen the fish again in the three days since, despite spending hours at the pond each day.

"I've heard of that fish," Rebekah said. "Dad told me about it. We used



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to live about a mile from your place, you remember that? At least, I guess it must be the same fish. I'm surprised it's still alive. Dad said people have been trying to catch it since he was a kid. I think trying to catch that fish used to be a major pastime in the grove, but I suppose that kind of thing's gone out of style."

"I blame video games," Graydon said.

Rebekah ignored him. "The fish even has a name. Guess what it is."

"Mr. Whiskers?"

"Sineater. Except when my Dad told me about it, he *started* to say 'Shiteater,' I think, and then decided to protect my delicate ears from such profanity."

"Shiteater," Graydon repeated. "That's charming. When I catch him, you can come over, and we'll have a big catfish dinner."

"I'm coming over anyway," she said. "You're going to let me stay the night next weekend, and I won't take no for an answer. I've *got* to get away from Lorrie for a while. She won't even eat fish anymore, that used to be our big compromise, but now she says it's 'morally repugnant.' She only ever ate salmon anyway, she said everything else was too fishy-tasting. I mean, c'mon, it's *fish*. What *should* it taste like?"

"Catfish is pretty bland, I guess," Graydon said.

"It's not bad, fried with the right spices," Rebekah said. "So can I come over? You can cook for me, though I don't think you'll be feeding me Shiteater, as appetizing as that sounds. You'd need more than a rod and reel to pull him in anyway."

"I don't know," Graydon said, thinking of the mess in his house, all Alton's things in the spare bedroom, also thinking of how hard it would be to sleep in the same house all night with Rebekah and not be able to touch her—he hadn't had sex since a bad one-night stand at school in New York. Rebekah knew that, and she must know that he still had feelings for her; he hadn't made it much of a secret. But it sounded like things were going badly with her and Lorrie, and Rebekah and Graydon *had* been lovers, before, in dim pre-college antiquity, so . . .

Rebekah snorted. "Come on. Like you're too busy? You've got too much other stuff to do?"

Gradyon didn't answer, didn't let any expression touch his face at all.

"Oh, hey, I'm sorry, Gray," Rebekah said, reaching across the table to touch his hand. "I didn't mean anything by it, you're getting your head together, figuring out what you want to do, and that's fine."

Graydon nodded, but he didn't think Rebekah believed what she'd just said—for her, life *was* work, being active, moving forward. She wouldn't be treading water if she were in Graydon's position. Hell, she'd never have let herself get into Graydon's position in the first place, blowing off classes, avoiding advisors, finally being "invited to pursue graduate studies elsewhere," as he'd been. Rebekah didn't have much patience for self-pity.

"Sure," he said. "Next Friday?"

Salmon aren't much like catfish. Salmon are beautiful, insofar as fish can be beautiful, with silver scales and graceful bodies. Catfish are ugly,



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whiskered, mud-colored, slow. Salmon are wiser than other fish, wiser than many people, wiser than some bears. Catfish are not wise, but they are wily. Salmon, it is said, eat hazelnuts. Catfish eat shit and garbage and dead things. Salmon are patient as gods, only hurrying to spawn. Catfish are patient as death, only hurrying to feed. The flesh of salmon is delicious. The flesh of catfish is bland as rainwater. Salmon sometimes grant wishes, when that seems the wise course. Catfish can grant wishes, too, but different wishes, for different reasons.

Salmon know more than catfish, but catfish remember everything.

That weekend, Graydon studied how to catch giant catfish. It was surprisingly uncomplicated, at least in theory, according to the books and websites he consulted, but the definition of "giant" seemed to be thirty or forty pounds, which he thought was far smaller than Shiteater. He looked further, and discovered that the largest catfish ever caught in the U.S. had come from a pond in Tennessee, and weighed one hundred and eleven pounds. Graydon had no idea how big Shiteater was, but he suspected it was bigger than that. The record-breaking fish had been caught with deep-sea tackle, but one trip to a sporting goods store showed Graydon that he couldn't afford that kind of equipment, not with the dregs of his student loans running out.

Still, Graydon was hardly an expert on catfish, so perhaps he'd overestimated Shiteater's size. Starting Monday he tried the recommended approaches for catching giant catfish from the shore, setting multiple poles and lines on the bank, with hooks set at various depths. He tried different baits, from small fish to rotten chicken and beef, but none of it worked, and the bait came out again sodden but untouched, and there was no sign of the big fish at all, not even a ripple.

Graydon didn't catch *anything*, as if there were no other fish in the pond at all, which he supposed was possible. Shiteater could have eaten them all. By Wednesday Graydon had given up on catching the monster, already bored and frustrated by the effort. It had been hubris to think he could catch such a monster, just one more instance of his reach exceeding his grasp.

On Thursday he sat on the bank with his dead brother's fishing rod jammed into the mud, line in the water, staring at the sky. The fishing rod was almost a formality now, just a prop, set-dressing. It justified his sitting by the water, in the shade, listening to the willow's drooping branches sway in the breeze.

The rod fell into the water. The bobber was submerged—had Shiteater bitten the hook and pulled in the rod? Graydon splashed into the pond, up to his knees, going after the rod, which was already floating away.

He reached for the rod . . . and something passed before him, brushing against his legs. He looked down, and there was Shiteater, *far* bigger than one hundred and eleven pounds, as big around as a barrel. Shiteater took the fishing rod into its mouth, like a dog picking up a thrown stick, and dove with it, disappearing.

Graydon stared down into the water for a moment, then shouted and slapped at the water angrily. "You fucking fish! Bring that back!" Shit-



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eater ignored food, it ignored everything, but it tried to eat his brother's *fishing rod*? What kind of beast was this?

Graydon slogged out of the water and sat, dripping, beneath the willow tree, thinking dark thoughts about fishing with dynamite, or about blasting Shiteater with a shotgun, but he didn't have dynamite, or any guns at all.

Something drifted on the surface of the water, eddying gradually toward the bank, until it floated just offshore in front of the willow. Graydon leaned forward to look at it.

It was a dreamcatcher, a wooden hoop threaded with string and hung with wet feathers. Alton had given one of those to Graydon years and years ago, after a trip he'd taken to an Indian reservation in the Southwest. Graydon had lost it in one of his many moves, and he'd missed it, a little. Graydon reached into the water and lifted the floating dreamcatcher out.

It was the same. The same snapped threads, the same gray-and-white feathers, the same size, everything. It was the dreamcatcher he'd lost, the one Alton had given him, he'd almost swear to it.

Graydon looked at the pond for a while. He'd baited his hook, that first day, with one of Alton's lures. He lost the lure, but found a motorcycle helmet. Now he'd lost Alton's fishing rod, and found a dreamcatcher.

The thoughts that occurred to him were ridiculous.

But, on the other hand, they were testable.

Graydon went back to the house, and came back a bit later, carrying some of the things Alton had left behind.

There are myths about salmon, but catfish don't warrant much more than folklore. Some say that catfish bite well when it thunders, or that they're easy to catch when it rains; that catfish will bite a hook dipped in motor oil, or that you'll be lucky fishing for them if your pockets are turned inside out. If an owl hoots in the daylight, the catfish are easy to catch.

All of those beliefs are true. But some of them confuse cause and effect.

By nightfall, Graydon had thrown almost all of Alton's possessions into the pond, and received an equal number of things in return. Throwing in Alton's class ring brought back one of his brother's running shoes, his initials written in permanent marker on the inside of the tongue. Throwing in freshman algebra class notes brought back a sparkling geode Alton had used as a bookend, though Graydon had to fish that out with a net after Shiteater swam repeatedly over the spot where it rested, like Flipper the dolphin from that old TV show, trying to explain something to the stupid humans. Shiteater ate almost everything Graydon threw him. Graydon intentionally threw in a few things with no connection to Alton—a used paperback he'd picked up at a yard sale for a dime, a salt shaker that came with the house, a handful of change. Shiteater ignored those things, and nothing came back in return. After an hour of casting in and receiving back, Graydon sat by a pile of returned objects, all of them things lost years before.



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"Did you eat my brother, you fuck?" Graydon asked, but knew it was absurd. Alton had died in a body of water that was little more than a creek, miles from here. The connection between his brother and Shiteater was stranger than that, more complicated, more mysterious. Perhaps it would prove too mysterious for Graydon to understand. When it grew dark, Graydon started to gather the objects Shiteater had given him, or allowed the pond to give him, or whatever. But why would he want to keep those things? They were just lost things, some with a charge of sentimental value, most lacking even that. Graydon began tossing the objects into the water, as he'd thrown back the helmet that first day, and Shiteater rose up again and swallowed it all, wolfing the things down as quickly as Graydon could throw them in.

It was hard to tell in the dark, but Shiteater seemed larger than he had been before. Nothing new came floating out of the pond after Graydon finished throwing everything in, and Shiteater didn't break the surface of the black water again once he finished eating. Graydon kept only the dreamcatcher—he suspected he might need it, as nightmares seemed inevitable—and trudged back to his house, thinking.

In psychoanalysis, "fishing" refers to a process whereby subconscious thoughts, feelings, and motivations are drawn up randomly, without any attempt to order or explain them until later. The process is poorly named, since it is more like dredging or using a drag-net than the precise efforts of an angler—it pulls up everything, garbage and treasure alike. It's a technique that only a catfish could love.

A good fisherman, on the other hand, knows just what sort of bait to use, and where to cast his line.

Graydon woke early on Friday morning and decided to continue his experiments.

He threw in one of his mother's good china cups and received a small jar, labeled with a piece of masking tape, that contained the gallstones she'd had surgically removed when Graydon was fifteen. He remembered visiting her in the hospital, remembered her telling him that the doctors were going to give her the gallstones, how she planned to throw them into the ocean next time they went to the coast. She was already starting to lose it, then, her mind beginning its slow unraveling, but it had seemed like simple eccentricity in those days, not the full-blown dementia it would become.

Graydon looked at the jar for a while. This was a valuable discovery. This meant the fish didn't have anything to do with Alton, not specifically. Graydon threw the gallstones back into the water. Shiteater was—was—

He didn't know what Shiteater was. Something to do with the dead, maybe. Or memory, or loss, or grief, or hope, or closure. Graydon couldn't figure it out. It wasn't like in stories, where things were neatly explained, where the mystery had a function, however obscure, where the operations of the supernatural could be explained. This was something else. Something magical, but incomprehensible, which was perhaps the nature of



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real magic. But Graydon couldn't ignore it, couldn't turn his back and go on living, forget about the pond, and the creature that lived in it.

There was a story about a magical salmon. Rebekah had told him about it, after her trip to Ireland, where she'd met Lorrie. There once was a wise salmon that lived in a pool, and ate magic nuts, and some great Irish hero caught the fish, and roasted it, and that was a pretty good deal, because whoever ate the fish would gain its wisdom.

What would happen if Graydon ate Shiteater? Would he gain wisdom? Or magic? The ability to call the dead, speak to the dead? Or the ability to *forget* the dead? There was supposed to be a river in Hell whose waters made you forget, and Graydon suspected that, if such a river were real, it would be inhabited by fat brown channel cats, just like Shiteater. What better fish to have the flesh of forgetfulness than a bland catfish, fed on garbage?

Hadn't Rebekah said the fish was also called Sineater?

It didn't matter. He'd never catch it anyway.

Graydon lay under the willow tree, and looked up at the sky, and after a while he fell asleep.

Someone nudged Graydon in the ribs. He opened his eyes, and there was his brother Alton, standing over him, wearing his motorcycle jacket, boots, and jeans. His hair was wet, even his stupid little goatee. "You're more full of shit than that fish, bro," he said.

"Alton?" Graydon said. The tree was making a low noise, like weeping, and the branches were moving despite the lack of wind.

Alton squatted down beside Graydon. "Oh, don't get up," he said ironically. "I'm not offended. I'm dead, after all. But *you're* not."

"Alton, I don't understand," Graydon said. That was the simple truth, and it almost made him burst out crying—he didn't understand why his mother had lost her mind, why Rebekah had fallen in love with a woman, why his brother had died, why grad school had been so difficult, why Shiteater was eating the physical reminders of his loss without taking the memories themselves away.

"Nobody understands," Alton said. "Maybe that's for the best. Listen. You don't want to eat that fish. I don't know what would happen if you did, but it's a big monster that eats dead things, it's not shiny and silver and full of magic nuts. Let it go. Quit wallowing. Get your life back together, while you still have one."

Alton had never been so blunt in life—he'd always been very live-and-let-live, but maybe death had changed that. "Shit, Alton, it's *hard*, you don't know what it's like."

"Nobody knows what it's like. And just because it hurts your feelings when I say you're wallowing, that doesn't mean it isn't *true*. You can't go on like this." The tree was moaning more loudly now, and night was falling quickly. "I have to go," Alton said. "It's getting late."

"Alton, no, I still don't—"

Someone nudged Graydon in the ribs. He opened his eyes. Rebekah stood over him, the sun behind her and a bottle of wine in her hand, looking down at him with a grin. "Have a nice nap? Shall I assume dinner isn't ready?"

Graydon groaned and sat up. "I had a dream. . . ."



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"I bet," Rebekah said. "Did it involve me and Lorrie and warm oil?"

Graydon grimaced. "Lorrie isn't my type."

"I thought all you guys got off on the idea of two women together."

"I like it better when the women are interested in me, too."

"Well, hey, it's your dream," she said. "Come on. I brought steaks."

"I was supposed to cook for *you*."

"Knock yourself out. I don't mind if you do the cooking. I just brought the food."

"Does Lorrie know you're eating steak?"

"What Lorrie doesn't know . . ." Rebekah said airily, and Graydon wondered what *that* meant, if Rebekah had other things in mind for tonight, more things Lorrie didn't need to know about.

He went back to the house with her, and for the first time in days, he didn't think about Shiteater at all.

Graydon made steaks while Rebekah good-naturedly insulted his housekeeping.

"You never used to care so much about tidiness," Graydon said, standing at the stove, sautéing mushrooms.

"You try living with Lorrie, you'll start to care about tidy, too. One of us has to, and it's not going to be her."

"Sounds like you guys are going through a tough time."

"Yeah, but I don't think Lorrie realizes it. She can be pretty clueless sometimes." Rebekah had opened the wine right away, and now she sipped from a full glass. "Her newest thing? She says I drink too much. I have a few beers on the weekends, maybe a glass of wine at night, and she says I'm an 'incipient alcoholic.'"

"Sounds like she's worrying about all the wrong things," Graydon said.

"I didn't come here to talk about Lorrie, Gray," Rebekah said. "No offense, but it's a subject I'm a little tired of, having to live with it every day."

"Sorry. What *did* you come here to talk about?"

"Honestly? I'd hoped we could talk a little bit about you, Gray."

He kept cooking, unsure how to take that. Rebekah always favored the direct approach—she would just ask, in his position—but Graydon was not so comfortable. So he said, "I've been trying to catch that fish. I see it, all the time, but I can't get it."

"Try a speargun," she said. "They're pretty accurate over short distances. If you really see it that often, you can probably get it."

"Yeah? Nothing I've read suggested a speargun."

She shrugged. "Well, you could try dynamite, but I figure you want to get the fish out in one piece. Should I take this change of subject to mean you don't want to talk about you? Because I'm worried about you, Gray. I think you're sinking here, and I'm trying to throw you a rope."

Graydon turned off the heat under the mushrooms. "Oh," he said. "And here I'd hoped you were planning to confess your love." He said it lightly, but he could tell from her expression that she saw past that. She'd always been able to look straight through him.

"I wish I could, Gray. I know you've carried a candle for me all this time, but . . ." She shook her head. "I've got to stick things out with Lorrie. We've been in it too long to just give up."



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"But if things don't work out . . ."

Rebekah looked into her wine, then shook her head, her braids swaying. "No, Gray."

"I thought you always said you were bisexual?"

She half-smiled. "It's not about the sex. It's . . . I don't know. I just don't see you that way anymore. Romantically. I'm not sure I did even when we were dating. You were the nicest guy I knew—you still are—and that's what attracted me, but as for any real spark, chemistry . . . I don't think it was there. I wanted it to be."

Graydon poured a glass of wine for himself, trying to keep his hands steady. "That's great, Rebekah," he said. "Telling me you never loved me at all."

"I always loved you. I still do. Just . . . not that way. And I think you needed to hear that, so you'd stop holding out hope, if that's what you've been doing. The way you look when I tell you I'm having problems with Lorrie, you try to hide how happy it makes you, but I can see it, and I don't like it. Maybe it's my own fault, for not saying this before."

"Understood," Graydon said, turning back to the stove. "I'm going to make salad."

"Do you want me to leave?" she said.

Graydon stood stiffly for a moment, then slumped. He sighed. "No. I like having you here. Obviously. You can't blame a guy for hoping, can you?"

"I guess not," she said.

Dinner was subdued, but after a few more glasses of wine Graydon began to relax. He felt oddly burned-out inside, hollow, but not tense. The reason for the tension was gone. Besides, maybe Rebekah was just fooling herself, maybe in time she'd see how good he was for her. . . . He thought of his dream of Alton, his dead brother telling him to move on. But he wanted to move on with *Rebekah*. What else did he have left?

Midnight came, and went, as they talked about books, movies, old memories. They didn't talk about Lorrie, and Rebekah didn't bring up whatever she'd wanted to say about Graydon wasting his life and his time. Finally Rebekah stretched and said, "So where do I sleep?"

"You can take my bed. I'll take the couch."

She nodded, then looked down at her hands in her lap, uncharacteristically shy. "Listen, Gray, I know you must be feeling very isolated and cut off . . . if you wanted, you could come to bed with me. I know how hard it is to be alone, to crave intimacy and not find it. Things haven't exactly been warm between me and Lorrie lately, and I could use some comfort, too. It wouldn't mean anything, except that you're my friend and I love you, but, if you want . . ."

In that moment, Graydon realized that Rebekah didn't know him, not really; or if she did, she was deluding herself now, or just using him for her own needs. If Graydon made love to Rebekah, he *wanted* it to mean something. He wanted it to mean that she was coming back to him, that they would be lovers, that they would be together. To have sex together, without any of that . . . it would be a killing thing. He would hate himself tomorrow, and this hollow feeling might never go away. He should say no.

But how could he say no to the chance to make love to Rebekah?



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"Yes," he said. "I'd like that."

Here is the reason the salmon of wisdom laughed when it thought of being eaten:

It was prophesied that the hero Finegas would catch the salmon, and cook it, and eat it, and gain all knowledge, and thus become a greater hero. Finegas caught the salmon, but, being a hero, he was not accustomed to doing his own cooking, and so he had his apprentice Fionn roast the fish instead. The apprentice would not have dreamed of eating his master's meal, but he accidentally burned his thumb while turning the fish on the fire. Without thinking, Fionn stuck his burned thumb into his mouth and sucked it.

Thus tasting the fish. Thus gaining all its knowledge, and leaving his master, the hero, no wiser than before.

That is why the salmon laughed.

The morning after he slept with Rebekah, Graydon was perfectly charming, cooking breakfast, laughing with her, kissing her cheek. Inside, his heart was a cinder. He bid her farewell, promising to get together with her later in the week.

When she was gone, he took four bottles of wine to the pond. He drank two, and poured the other two into the water. "Have a drink with me, Shiteater!" he shouted. "You're my only friend!"

The catfish did not surface.

On Sunday, Graydon didn't fish. During his research he'd learned that it was bad luck to fish on Sundays, and it seemed like a good time to be superstitious. Besides, he was hungover, and didn't wake up until midafternoon. He thought about going to Atlanta, but the stores would be closed already—nothing stayed open very late in the South on Sundays.

On Monday he went into the city and spent most of his remaining money on a speargun. He practiced in the yard with it all afternoon, shooting his sofa cushions for practice. There was no reason to rush. He wanted to do this right.

Tuesday he rose before dawn, took the speargun and a bag of his most precious things to the pond, and waded into the water. He scattered his bait, and called for Shiteater as it began to rain.

The catfish came out of the water and began to eat the things Graydon had scattered. Graydon watched, not moving, rain soaking his hair and filling the pond with ripples. As Shiteater swallowed the last floating thing—Rebekah's braid—Graydon pointed the speargun at its head and fired.

The spear sank deep into Shiteater's head, and the fish spasmed, tail flailing against the water. Graydon wrapped both hands around the shaft of the spear and began pulling Shiteater toward the bank. It was easier than he'd expected, because the water buoyed the dead fish up. Graydon climbed onto the muddy, slick bank and wrestled Shiteater's vast body onto the grass. He went back to the house and returned with a wheelbarrow and some scrap boards. After bracing the wheelbarrow's wheel with a brick, he leaned the boards against the wheelbarrow, creating a make-



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shift ramp. Graydon shoved Shiteater's heavy corpse up the boards until it flopped into the wheelbarrow, then wheeled it to the concrete patio behind his house. As he pushed, the rain stopped, just a brief summer shower, there and gone.

Graydon dumped Shiteater onto the concrete and stood looking down at it, expecting some thrill of triumph, but he was still all cinders and stones inside, and felt nothing. He went inside for his knives, then set about gutting and cleaning the catfish, referring often to a book he'd bought that explained the process.

After a while Graydon examined the contents of Shiteater's stomach, but found little of interest, not even the things he'd most recently fed the fish—just weeds and mud. That was a disappointment. Graydon had hoped there would be . . . something inside. Something special.

Well. He could still eat the catfish. That was the main thing. And it would cause something to happen—kill him, give him transcendent wisdom, make him forget, give him oblivion. Something.

While Graydon cleaned the fish, the phone rang, but he ignored it, and eventually the caller gave up.

Graydon was covered in blood and fishguts by the time he finished cleaning Shiteater. He wrapped the edible parts in plastic bags to keep the bugs from getting at them, then went to clean out the fireplace—Shiteater was too big for the oven, and Graydon wanted to cook him all at once.

When the fireplace was clean, Graydon put charcoal and lighter fluid under the grate and started a fire. Once it was burning well, he put Shiteater on the grate. Soon, the fish began to roast. The smoke was strangely odorless.

Graydon went into the bathroom and took a shower, letting the blood and guts cascade into the tub, letting the hot water pound on his overstrained muscles. After a while, afraid the fish would burn, he got out and wrapped a towel around himself.

Rebekah was in the living room, kneeling before the fire, looking at the fish. "Hey, naked guy," she said. "I tried to call, but you didn't pick up. I figured you were out fishing. I guess I was right. This thing's enormous."

"What are you doing here?" he said, thoroughly derailed. He hadn't expected to see Rebekah again so soon, and he wasn't sure what to do—as if, having successfully captured Shiteater, he had no further inner resources, and could make no more plans.

"God, Lorrie and I had the worst fight, you wouldn't believe it," she said. "I had to get out of there for a while." She leaned closer to the fire. "I think your fish is starting to crumble and fall apart," she said, and reached out to nudge the flesh more securely onto the grate.

"No!" Graydon shouted, stepping toward her.

Rebekah hissed and said "Shit! I burned myself." She stuck her thumb in her mouth and sucked.

Graydon watched her, holding his breath.

After a long moment, Rebekah took her thumb out of her mouth. A string of glistening saliva still connected the ball of her thumb to her lips.

She looked up at Graydon, into his face. The string of saliva broke.

Rebekah's eyes went wide. O



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# AN ALTERNATE UNIVERSE ALPHABET

contains letters with sounds
you have never heard
and will not. Each
is the antimatter opposite
of the sounds we read and hear.

If "a" and "anti-a"
were to come together
each would be extinguished
in a tiny yawn at the edge
of consciousness.

Whole sentences would
swallow each other
in a nearly inaudible whirr
like that of the white noise generators
people buy for their bedrooms.

And if this poem
were to meet its anti-poem
in the interstice between universes,
the silence of their embrace
would be deafening.

—Sandra Lindow

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# THE SUMMER OF THE SEVEN

Paul Melko

**Paul lives in Ohio with his beautiful wife and two children. He tells us that, though he used to spend his spare time in the garden, now that the fuzzy bunnies have armed themselves with SIG 510 assault rifles, he can only watch from the back door. What they are using as fertilizer to grow their enormous carrots, he doesn't want to know. "Summer of the Seven" is the third in his series—that includes "Strength Alone" (*Asimov's*, December 2004)—concerning post-human teens coming to grips with their identity.**

In the summer of our fourteenth year, we weren't the only one to live with Mother Redd on the farm in Worthington. That was the year the Seven came to stay.

"After lunch, you'll need to clean out the back bedroom," Mother Redd said that morning at breakfast. One of her was busy frying eggs at the stove, while another was squeezing orange juice. Her third was setting the table. We had just come in from chores—picking diamond flowers, plucking sheep cloth, and, secretly, milking the beer bush for a few ounces of lager—and were lounging around the kitchen table.

Meda, my true sister and our pod's interface, asked the question we were thinking. "Who's coming to stay?" It wasn't a visit. For a visit, we wouldn't bother to clean out the bedroom; we'd just pull out the beds from the couch in the downstairs den and let the visitor sprawl around the first floor. Or, if it was more than one person, we'd lay quilts and pillows in the great room.

One of Mother Redd gave us a look that said we asked too many questions. "A guest," she said.



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We all shrugged.

We spent the morning on calculus and physics. We were doing word problems: if you fired a cannonball from a train car and it lands on another train car, how fast are the train cars traveling apart after five seconds. Stuff like that.

*Why would anyone mount a cannonball on a train car?* I sent.

Strom laughed. Bola, who understood force and motion intuitively, flashed us the image of the cannonball and its graceful trajectory. Then he added air currents, and gravity perturbations and other second-order forces. As he added in tidal effects and the pull of Jupiter, Quant sent, *Seven and a half centimeters per second.*

"At least let me write something down before you give me the answer," Meda said. She had the pencil, but Quant was solving the problems in her head.

"Why?"

"For the practice!"

"Why?"

Meda groaned. My sister is always so expressive; there's never any doubt what she's—or we're—feeling. That's why she was our interface.

"We have to show our work on the tests! We can't just write down the answer."

Quant shrugged.

*Sometimes Quant won't be with us,* I sent.

*Moira!*

I felt Quant's surprise and a moment's fear; we'd been together for almost fourteen years. Being cut off from the rest of us was what we most often had nightmares about. And if one of us had a nightmare, we all had it.

"Okay." I sent a smile and reassurance to Quant, and she relaxed and returned focus to the problem set. We worked through the rest of them on paper, Quant guiding us through the equations to the answer she already knew.

After lunch, we trudged up to the back bedroom and started moving boxes. We couldn't just throw the junk out the window and then haul it to the trash heap; Manuel had found a pipette set, and there were frames and pictures in some of the boxes. We had to be careful.

"What's this?" Meda asked, holding up a photo in an old plastic frame.

We saw the image through her eyes, well enough for me to recognize Mother Redd, a younger woman than she was now, and a quartet. Her hair was brown and bobbed, not gray and long as she wore it now. And she was slender in the picture, not anything like the plump, huggable women we knew.

"That was before—" Meda said.

*Yes.*

Mother Redd was a trio now, but once, a long time ago, she had been a quartet. She had been a medical doctor, a famous one; we'd read a few of her papers and barely understood them, even though we were the highest order—a sextet—and specialized in math and science. Then one of her had died, leaving her three-quarters of what she had been.

Again, the fear of separation rippled through us, emotions that we



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would have to learn to check. Strom shivered, and I touched his hand. To lose one of ourselves, to become a quintet. . . .

Meda looked closely at the picture. I knew what she was wondering, though I could only taste the curiosity. Which one of Mother Redd had died? I didn't think we could tell; she had been identical quadruplets. Meda put the picture away.

"Look at this," Quant said. She held up a tattered and old biology book. The date inside was 2020.

"That is so old!" Meda said. "Older than pods. What could that have that's any use?"

Quant thumbed through the pages and it fell open at a colored plate, a bisection of the female body.

"Now that's sexy," Manuel said. Arousal mingled with embarrassment. The stupidest things triggered desire in our male components. I sometimes wished that we were an all-female pod like Mother Redd, instead of an equally mixed sextet.

He turned the page, and there was a dissected frog, with overlays, so that you could flip from the skin, into the musculature, and then the internal organs.

"The spleen's in the wrong place," Bola said.

We had built frogs in biology class last year. Ours had been the best jumper.

As we were stowing the last of the boxes in the barn loft, we heard the whine of a jet car.

"Folsom 5X," Bola said. "Six-prop hydrogen burner."

It was actually a Folsom 3M, a converted older skybus, but we didn't have time to razz him for his mistake. The skybus landed on the airpad behind the farmhouse, and we ran to meet it.

Mother Redd waved us back, and we saw why. The bus had already discharged its passenger and was whining back into the sky. Another pod stood there next to Mother Redd, its interface shaking hands.

"Hi, I'm Apollo Papadopulos," Meda said. "Welcome to—"

The newcomer turned to us, and we counted: a seven-person pod, a septet. Our greeting hung in Meda's mouth. We gaped in wonder, stunned by the sight. We were a sextet; our order was only six.

"Everyone knows that the higher the order, the stronger the pod," Quant said.

"That's not true," Meda said.

We'd gotten over our voicelessness and had managed a polite greeting to Candace Thurgood. Meda had shaken hands with the leader of the septet, one of six identical females, skinny, blonde-haired, green-eyed girls. The seventh member was a male, taller, just as skinny and pale in skin and hair. We're three females and three males; Meda and I were identical female twins, while our other pod mates were of different genetic stock.

Then Strom came up with the idea that we still had chores in the barn, and we made a quick exit, watching as the seven of Candace and the three of Mother Redd walked to the house.

*Yes, it is!*



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*No, it isn't!*

I shushed them with a whiff of baby pheromone, a poke at their childish behavior.

We all knew the history. The first pods had been duos, created almost fifty years ago, the first to use the chemical memory and pheromones to share feelings between two separate humans. Since then, the order of the pods and complexity of the chemical signaling had grown. We were a sextet, the largest order we'd ever seen. All our classmates were sextets. Everyone in the space program was a sextet.

"Because sextets are the largest order. They're the best," Strom said.

*Not anymore! Candace is a seven, a septet!*

It made sense. Genetic engineers were always trying to add to the power of an individual. Why wouldn't they try to build a seven? Or an eight?

"They succeeded in building one, finally."

"How old is she?"

"Younger than us. Maybe twelve."

*I hope she's not staying all summer.*

But we knew she was. We wouldn't have turned out the guest room if she wasn't.

*Maybe we can make her leave.*

I said, "We have to be nice. We have to be friends."

*We have to be nice, but we don't have to be friends.*

*Why be nice?*

I looked at Meda, and she said, "Oh, all right. Let's go be nice. At least there isn't eight of her."

Though how far away would *that* be?

We tried to be nice.

I was the one who'd advised it, and even I chafed at the manners of that arrogant septet.

"Fifteen point seven five three," Candace said, while we were still scribbling the problem. One of her was looking over Quant's shoulder as we sat at the great room table.

*I knew that*, Quant sent.

Still, Meda wrote the problem down and we worked through to the answer, while Candace tapped seven of her feet.

"Fifteen point seven five three three," Meda said.

"I rounded down," she said. "One of us—" She nodded at the identical girl to her left— "is specialized in mathematics. When you have seven, you know, you can do that. Specialize."

We were specialized too, we wanted to say, but I sent, *Humble.*

*She's specialized at being a git.*

"You're very smart," Meda said diplomatically. I hadn't even had to remind her.

"Yes, I am." She was standing so close that the pungent smell of her chemical thoughts tickled our noses and distracted us. It was almost rude to stand so close that our memories mingled. We couldn't understand her thoughts, of course, just a bit of self-satisfaction from the pheromones. The chemical memories that we passed from hand to hand, and, to some



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extent, by air, were pod-specific, most easily passed by physical touch at the wrists, where our pads were. Pheromones were more general, and indicated nuance and emotion. These were often common across all pods, especially those from the same creche. So even though our thoughts didn't mix together, it felt weird for her to be so close.

*She doesn't know any better,* I sent, touching the pad on Manuel's left wrist. *She's young.*

*We knew better at that age.*

*We should try to be friendly,* I sent.

"Do you want to go swimming this afternoon?" Meda asked.

Candace shook her head quickly, then she paused for a consensus. We smelled the chemical thoughts, pungent and slick in the air, and wondered why she had to consense on going swimming.

"We don't swim," she said finally.

"None of you?"

Another pause. They touched hands, tap, tap, tap, pads sliding together. "None of us."

"Okay. Well, we're going swimming in the pond."

The smell was stronger. The heads turned inward, and they held palms together for ten seconds. What was so complicated about going swimming?

Finally, she said, "We'll come and watch, but we won't swim in dirty water."

Meda said, "Okay," and we shrugged.

After physics, we studied biology, and, in that, Mother Redd instructed us closely. The farmhouse was not just a farmhouse; attached were a greenhouse and a laboratory with gene-parsers and splicers. The hundred hectares of woods, ponds, and fields were all Mother Redd's experiment, and part of it she let us work on. We were rebuilding the local habitat, reintroducing flora and fauna in a close facsimile to what had been there before the Exodus and the Gene Wars. Mother Redd was building beaver pods. She was letting us build pods of ducks.

Candace followed us to observe our latest version of duck: a clutch of ducklings that had been gengineered to share chemical duck memories, supposedly. There'd been success in modifying some mammals for chemical memories, but none for other classes of *Chordata*. We were trying to build a duck pod for the Science Fair at the end of the summer.

We'd released our ducklings—two different modified clutches—by a pond on the farm, and every morning, we went and watched how they worked together.

Bola slid between the reeds while the rest of us hunched down and listened to his thoughts on the wind. The chemical memories were fragile and diffused over distance, but still we could understand what he was seeing and thinking if we concentrated.

"Where are the ducks?" Candace asked.

"Shh!"

"I don't see them."

"You're going to scare them!"

"Fine." The seven of her folded her arms across her chests.

An image flitted across from Bola of the ducklings poking at the edge



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of the pond with their bills. They were still covered in yellow fluff that wasn't quite feathers yet.

"See? One of them saw that patch of moss and the others came over right away!"

*Maybe she signaled with sound.*

*Maybe it was random.*

We'd mounted pheromone detectors around the pond to pick up any intrapod memory-sharing among the ducks. So far, we'd measured nothing, so we were using observation to try to prove that the ducks were thinking as one.

"Here, ducky, ducky!"

"Candace!" Meda yelled.

The duck, about to climb into her hand, scattered with its siblings.

"What?"

"Will you leave our experiment alone?"

"I was just going to hold it."

"We want them to be wild, not bonded to a human."

"Fine." She turned and left, and, in disbelief, we watched her go. This was supposed to be where we spent *our* summers. This was *our* farm.

*It's going to be a long summer,* Strom sent.

We went swimming by ourselves that day, and, when we got back, we found Candace in the lab building her own duck.

*Great.*

"Look!" she cried. "I'm building a duck too!"

We didn't want to look, but I suggested we at least feign interest.

She showed us the gene sequence she was using, a modified string used with the beavers.

"We've tried that already," Meda said.

"Yeah, I know. I looked at your notes. But I'm adding a different olfactory sequence."

*She looked at our notes!* Our notes were on our locked desktop.

I advised calm, but Meda's face twitched with rage.

"Good luck," she grated, and we left.

In the barn, Meda railed, too angry for chemical thoughts. Her emotions filled the loft and caused the pigs Mother Redd was building to oink and stamp at us. "She's stealing our project, and she's stealing our notes. She has got to go!"

"She just wants to fit in," I said.

No one else was buying that.

"We should give her the benefit of the doubt," I said.

Manuel growled, and snaked his fury through the air.

"Anyone can enter the gengineering competition at the Fair," I said.

*We need to do something.*

*What?*

No one was looking at me.

*We need more ducks.*

*How many more?*

*A lot.*



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They all turned to me, and I smelled the consensus like fresh bread. I could have held out, but I didn't. I wanted to win the competition too.

"Fine."

We snuck all the incubators we could find from the lab into the barn. Candace had already tagged a couple for herself. Then we built a dozen more from spare parts.

For the genes, we begged cutting-edge sequences from Professor Ellis at the Institute—mammalian, reptilian, avian—anything that we could jam into the anatine DNA. We cooked eggs instead of doing our chores. We even cooked while we studied. By the time we were done cooking, we had over a gross of duck eggs incubating.

We figured that at least some of them would show *something* interesting that we could report at the Fair. Candace couldn't keep up with our volume of output either. We had her licked, no problem.

"Which egg has which genes?"

"Um," Meda said. Mother Redd was surveying the rows of duck eggs. We'd hidden the incubators in the empty stalls, but you couldn't miss the electric wires we'd strung across the rafters.

One of her eyed the code violations and tsked.

"None of these are marked," she said.

"Um," Meda said.

"Where's your control variable? Where's your lab books?"

We didn't bother to "um." Embarrassment coursed among us. I expected a well-deserved lecture, but instead Mother Redd said, "Come on. There's someone in the house I want you to meet."

We climbed down from the loft and followed Mother Redd across the yard to the house. I tried to force down the I-told-you-so deep inside.

Strom and Bola both threw me guilty looks.

Some scientist we were.

Candace and another pod were in the great room. The other pod was a quintet, in his thirties. One of him was examining one of Candace with a stethoscope; another tapped another of her on the chest.

"Doctor Thomasin. This is Apollo."

Four pods in the great room, large though it was, made the place pretty crowded, especially when one of us was a seven. We hung against the wall, and let Meda shake hands with Doctor Thomasin's interface.

"Ah, Apollo Papadopulos! A pleasure to meet someone with your strong lineage."

"Um, thanks, I guess."

*Who cares what our lineage is?* We had been designed and built, then raised in Mingo Creche. As far as we knew, our lineage was just the result of some scientists somewhere mixing eggs and sperm together.

"I'm Candace's doctor. I built her," he said.

Several of Candace blushed.

He was young to be a human gengineer. But he must have been good to have succeeded at a septet.

*Compare his and Candace's face*, Bola sent.



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I saw it the way Bola saw it: Thomasin was a genetic donor for Candace. He could have been her biological father if she'd been born that way.

*Weird.* We had no father or mother, though we understood the concept. Mother Redd took the title, but she was more a mentor than an actual mother to us.

"Congratulations," Meda said, though it seemed odd even as she said it.

"Thank you."

He turned and started discussing something regarding nanosplicing with Mother Redd, so we snuck out with Candace on our heels.

"Isn't he great?" she said.

"You have a nice father," Meda said, before I could cut her off.

"He's not my dad! He's my doctor."

"You look—"

*Meda!*

"How're your ducks doing?" she asked.

"I think they're gonna hatch soon!" she said. Bola pointed out that it was a different one talking than before; she'd changed faces when we changed topics. Meda was always our face; she did all our interfacing with other pods. "I've been varying the heating and light to simulate a real mother sitting on the eggs."

"Great," Meda said.

Another of Candace spoke up. How many faces did she use? "Did you know we had our first period? That's why Doctor Thomasin was here."

"Um." It was our turn to flush. I felt Strom's shock. He turned away from Candace and looked across the yard at the barn. Meda, Quant, and I had all had our first menses. We'd all had to deal with it, as well as wet dreams and all the other drawbacks of male and female puberty. But some things were best left within the pod.

"You know what that means, don't you?"

"Yeah, I think so," said Meda. "We're half female, you know."

"No. That isn't what I mean. Doctor Thomasin made me so I can breed true."

"What?"

"You know why all pods are gengineered."

"Yes!"

"If I breed with another of my type of pod, I can birth six members of a septet."

"If you breed with a six male, one female septet?"

"Yes!"

"Why do you need a septet? You just need one male to inseminate all of you and one more female to carry the seventh."

*They have a male,* Manuel sent.

*That is so gross.*

"Biological diversity, of course!"

We all felt foggy, the smell of confusion circling among us.

"But—"

"If *you* breed," she went on, "you'll just have normal human singletons who will still have to be coalesced into a pod. It won't happen naturally. With *me*, my children will be *born* as a pod!"



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"But—"

"It's so much more stable biologically, don't you see?"

"But—"

"Until pods can reproduce more pods, we're just a genetic dead-end. This is all part of Doctor Thomasin's work."

"But—"

"But what?"

"You're just a new breed. You're still human."

She stared at us with her fourteen green eyes. "I'm more than human, Apollo."

"So you can only have babies with a pod just like you, another of Dr. Thomasin's septets. You can't have babies with just anyone."

"Oh, I see what you're getting at. Don't be silly! Procreation doesn't have to follow love. I'll have children for the sake of the species regardless of who I bond with," Candace said.

"Did Doctor Thomasin pick your mate yet?"

"No. I guess not. Maybe."

She paused to think. This time we saw the interface cycle into the pack and another of the identical females take her place.

*Why is she doing that?* Manuel asked.

*Identity crisis,* Bola replied.

"Even if he has," the new face said, "that's fine. Besides, any mate will have to be one that he made. No one else has succeeded in building a septet."

"So you don't know other septets?" we asked.

"No. Not really. But there are others like me, I guess. And I'd mate with whomever was necessary, to propagate the species."

"Pods aren't a separate species. We're all human beings," we said.

"Of course we're a separate species!" she replied. "Pods are much better than singletons. It's obvious. And I'm much better than a sextet or a quintet or a quartet."

"We're all human," we said again.

"Well, *you* may be human, but I'm another species," she said, walking off.

*I'll say.*

We rotated the eggs every day. We measured the humidity with a wet bulb. We determined temperature with sensors that logged to our desktop. The damn alarms kept failing and waking us in the middle of the night. We couldn't just roll over and go back to sleep, since the ducklings might really be freezing to death. After fifteen days of incubation, we opened the vents on the incubators and lowered the temperature a half a degree.

Mother Redd's words had stung us, and we started keeping better records. We marked the eggs with their genome tag, at least the ones we could remember. We tracked temperature and humidity hourly and graphed the data.

We watched the brood by the lake meticulously, though the pheromone sensors never picked up a whiff of chemical thought and our lab books were line after line of "No sign of consensus."



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We avoided Candace when we could, which was tougher than it would seem on a farm of over a hundred hectares. Mother Redd had given her chores that seemed to overlap ours.

Candace's arguments, however, were something we couldn't avoid. I found myself researching her ideas. She was wrong about a lot of things and right about a lot of things too.

The classical definition of "species" still stated that pods were human. If Meda, Quant, or I had a child with an unmodified human, the child would be human. We weren't a new species. However, we weren't entirely standard human either. We had been modified by our predecessors to have pads on our palms that could transfer chemical memories among our podmates. We had glands at our necks to send pheromonal emotions and crude thoughts. We had enhanced olfactory capability to decode the scents. Unless closely inspected, we would not look any different than a human from a century ago.

But the fact that we were a pod, that we functioned as a single being in the fabric of our society, indicated that we were a radically different *type* of social organization, created by our biological technology and artificially sustained. If there were no creche-system and no genetic modification of embryos to add pod traits, pod society would disappear in a few generations, replaced by normal humans. Candace was right; if the Overgovernment fell and society crumbled, then pods would fall apart. There would be no pods without constant social manipulation. We were the most advanced animal on the planet, but behind that façade was a framework of scaffolding and wires.

There were three million pods in the world, which amounted to just over ten million people. Three decades ago, there had been over ten billion humans on the planet. The cataclysm was far from over. We pods had inherited the Earth, not because we were superior, but because we had failed to leave or die or advance with the rest of the Community. It was a fragile ecosystem we had inherited. Our own biology was fragile, and perhaps more desperate than we knew.

We spoke to Mother Redd.

"How stable is our society?" Meda asked one evening as we cleaned up after dinner. Candace was out turning her duck eggs.

"We have a representative democracy implemented by consensus-formed legislation. It is more stable than most," she said.

"No. I mean biologically and societally. If we lost our scientific knowledge, what would happen?"

One of Mother Redd stopped her drying to look at us, while the other two continued with the pots.

"A sage question. I don't know, but I expect that the next generation of humans would be normal. Perhaps we could form pods; perhaps the genetic changes we have implemented would breed true."

"Do we know if they will?"

She smiled. "Perhaps you should do a literature search."

"I did! I couldn't understand the results." Biology wasn't our strongest subject. Physics and math suited us.

"Technology gives us our individuality. That is the problem. And, given



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that, we will not willingly give up our individuality, we can't see the path back," Mother Redd said. "We have passed our own singularity, just as the Community did. And you have hit upon the greatest problem of our world. How do we propagate?"

There were some who said the Exodus—the near instantaneous vanishing of all the billions of Community members—was a technological singularity, the transmogrification of normal humans to post-humans. Mother Redd was saying that the pod society had created its own parallel singularity, one we could not reverse without losing our identity.

"Candace is the future, isn't she?"

"Maybe. Doctor Thomasin's ideas are radical. Perhaps reproducing septets are the answer. There are others researching it, including ethicists."

"Why?"

"If our society and our biology are unsound, we cannot allow them to advance."

"But—"

Candace bounded in then, shouting, "One of my ducklings is hatching!"

We all went out to watch the wet and lizard-like bird peck its way through the shell. Our mind was on Mother Redd's words, and we kept touching hands, swapping thoughts, as we considered them. I realized then, as we watched the ducklings hatch, that there were those who were considering the elimination of pod society and biology as a desirable path into the future.

Doctor Thomasin visited again the next day. He was visiting every week now, examining Candace for hours. That evening, after he left, Candace hadn't shown for dinner, so Mother Redd sent us up to fetch her.

"Candace?" Meda called, as she knocked on the door.

"She needs to check the temperature on the ducklings, too," said Bola. We pretended we didn't care about Candace's project, but clearly we did.

*We just don't want the ducklings to die!*

"Yes?" Her voice was soft, and male. When had her male component done anything but stay in the background?

Meda pushed open the door.

Candace was sprawled on the beds, her faces flushed, her shirts wet at the pits. The room reeked of heavy thinking.

"Are you okay?"

The male was the only one sitting. "We'll be okay."

"It's dinner time."

"We're not feeling too well. I think we'll pass."

One of the females opened her eyes.

*Didn't she have green eyes before?*

*Yes.*

"Do you want us to check on your ducklings?"

"What ducklings?" she asked.

"Your Science Fair project!"

She grasped wrists, consensing.

"Oh, right. Thanks."

"Are you all right?"



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"I'm fine. Really."

*Maybe Doctor Thomasin gave her a vaccination.*

*She's old enough to make her own vaccinations.*

We ate quickly, then went out to the lab to feed and check Candace's ducks. Ours were still a few days from hatching.

Her ducks had a fine layer of down and weren't too noisy nor too active, so the temperature was probably okay. We dipped bits of bread in water and dropped the food in the hutches.

*Don't let them imprint on us.*

*Why not? That would be funny.*

*Because they wouldn't survive in the wild if they did. They need to imprint on each other.*

*Like we are.*

We shared a glance. We were indeed imprinted on each other.

Two days later, our own eggs began to hatch. Twelve hatched that day, which wasn't so bad. Twenty-five hatched the day after. Then fifty-some the day after that. We were too frazzled to notice when the last fifty hatched.

The barn suddenly became a duck maternity ward, with assembly lines for soaked corn meal, temperature and humidity checks, and bedding manufacture.

We quickly found that the chicken brooders we'd planned to use for the ducks were too small, and had to build half a dozen more out of plywood and chicken wire. We kept one as a spare so that we could move a clutch at a time to clean the brooders.

"We should have kept better track of the gene sequences that we used," Strom said. He was scooping duckling after duckling from one brooder to another. He held up one that had a lizard's tail attached to its fluffy bottom.

Bola looked into the emptied brooder and held his nose. We all felt his revulsion though we couldn't actually smell what he smelled.

"How long until they can forage on their own?"

*Six weeks.*

*Not soon enough.*

We had so many ducklings to take care of that we couldn't spend a moment watching for pod-like behaviors. Candace, however, loved to stop by the barn and provide details of her latest experiment and success.

"I separate one duckling," she explained to us, "and feed it a bit of food. The other ducklings start quacking within seconds."

"They smell the food," we said.

"Maybe. But it also works for pain stimuli."

"Pain stimuli?"

"Sure. When I pinch one of the ducklings, the others start making noise."

"You're pinching your ducks?"

"Just a gentle pinch. Besides, it's for science!"

"Right."

"I've got video of the process. It's very compelling," she said.

"You'll have a good presentation at the Science Fair then," we said.



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"You have an awful lot of ducks."

We turned and stared at her, all six of us.

"We know."

"This one has Dalmatian spots."

"We know!"

*Her eyes are green again.*

*She looks pale.*

"Are you still sick?"

She swapped faces, something she did all the time now. "A little still. Allergies, maybe."

"What are allergies?"

"Reactions to air-borne particles and pollen. It used to be very common. Doctor Thomasin thinks I have it, and it just manifested when I came to the farm."

"Hopefully he'll fix that in the next batch of septets he cooks up," Meda said.

"Yeah, I guess."

As she walked away, Quant showed us memories of her when she first arrived. *She's grown fifteen centimeters in a month.*

*Growth spurt.*

*Bigger boobs.* This was followed by a pheromone leer from Manuel.

"Stop it."

*There's something wrong with her. Changing interfaces, allergies, forgetting things.*

The rest of my pod shrugged at me.

*What can we do?*

*Talk to Mother Redd.*

We didn't have time to ponder Candace's allergies and growth chart, and we never talked with Mother Redd. The ducklings needed their food.

Two weeks later, we started letting the ducklings roam the farmyard for food.

*Look! They re-form into the same subgroups if we separate them!*

I didn't understand until Bola shared his memory of what he saw. Bola's specialty was spatial, and, in an instant, I saw how the nearly identical ducklings coalesced into groups when we removed them from the brooder.

*It could be the group they imprinted to.*

*Perhaps imprinting is a crude form of pod-building.*

Strom scattered the ducklings and we watched them re-form into their subgroups. We marked a few of them with paint on their backs and did it again and again, showing how a single group of six re-formed every time.

It seemed that we were on to something.

Unfortunately, so were the six ducklings with the paint on their backs. They followed Strom wherever he went. When he broke them apart, they re-formed and headed straight back to his ankles.

*They've imprinted on you.*

"Didn't they imprint on themselves already?" Strom asked as the ducklings clustered on his feet.



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*Apparently not. Dad.*

Strom answered that with a sardonic smile.

Once we moved the ducklings to the lake, we actually had time to do our chores and study. One hundred and fifty ducks, less the six that would not leave Strom's feet, made for a crowded, messy lake, and we still had to drag out bags of bread so the birds wouldn't starve.

Candace continued to have luck with her clutch of ducks, while we showed mannerisms that could easily be attributed to other ducklike behavior patterns.

"This fair project is gonna suck," Quant said. "We've got nothing."

*Negative results are still results.*

"Negative results don't get the blue ribbon."

Before we knew it, the Science Fair arrived and we drove over to the county fairgrounds with Mother Redd and Candace in the farm bus. We left the ducks, though Strom's six quacked pitifully.

"Can't we take the aircar?" Meda asked. "And can't we drive?"

"No."

The county seat was a good 100 kilometers away, a mere hop in an aircar, but two hours in the old bus. It was a tight fit with three of us in it. We opened the windows, and that helped.

In the three decades since the Exodus, there'd been little need for the roadway infrastructure. With the smaller global population, farms that had been critical to feed the masses had gone fallow. We passed orchards where the clear lines of trees were now the start of a chaotic forest, carefully tended hybrids gone wild. It was a bumpy ride, over a decaying road.

"It's hard to imagine what was here twenty years ago," we said to Candace.

She looked at us blank-eyed. "Yeah," she said, though we didn't think she knew what we'd said.

"Are you nervous?"

She shrugged.

"Do you want to borrow a brush?" we asked. Her hair was straggly.

"I'm okay!" she shrilled. "Leave me alone."

*Just nervous.* We had butterflies too.

"Sorry."

One of Mother Redd was driving, and the other two glanced at us. Manuel shrugged to show our confusion at Candace's overreaction, and Mother Redd turned back to the road.

Bola read the schedule for the Fair, while we watched the countryside.

*One hundred junior presentations.*

That was a lot. That was one for every student pod in the county. He read off some of the presentation titles.

"Hyper-efficient Hydrogen Engines with Platinum Catalyst."

*We did that in Third Class.*

"Vaccination Study for Rhinovirus AS234."

*The cure for the uncommon cold,* Strom sent.

"Cold Fusion Yields in Superconducting Amalgams."

*That'll never work.*



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*Nothing with avian genetics except for us and Candace.*

"Harumph."

On our side of the bus, we passed a large tract of overgrown houses, small three-story homes, with just a few meters between them.

"Look at those. So many people in such a small space."

Mother Redd said, "Each of those housed a family, just four or five people." She must have smelled our puzzlement. "It's hard to believe that the population of the Earth dropped by three orders of magnitude in the course of just a couple of years. You two were born just after the most cataclysmic events in human history. Before the Exodus, pods and multi-humans comprised less than a tenth of a percent of humanity. Now we are the stewards of the entire world. It is a grave responsibility."

Quant slid across the aisle to catch a glimpse of the Ring. Candace flinched as Quant neared her, and glared at us. The sky was pale blue and cloudless, and there, arcing across its dome, was the Ring, the symbol of the Community and now a lifeless reminder of their former glory.

"They failed," said Candace, not her face, but the male. "They're a dead-end."

"So are we," Meda said. "According to your theories. We can't breed true."

*Don't bait her*, I sent. *She's not feeling well.*

Meda glared at me. "Sorry, Candace," she said. "Do you want to talk . . . or something?"

She didn't turn; her eyes remained on the Ring.

*It isn't worth trying,* Manuel sent bitterly.

I couldn't really argue with him, and we turned away to watch the desolate countryside slip by.

The Science Fair was held in a huge building that dated to the previous century. It was crowded, almost like school, pods shoulder to shoulder with other pods; it was nearly impossible to think with all the interference in the air. We felt so crowded after the summer on the farm with just Candace and Mother Redd. It would be good to get back to school in a few weeks.

We found the junior pavilion, registered, and then wandered the Fair. Our presentation wasn't until the afternoon, and Candace's was right before ours.

*Stealing our thunder again.*

The junior pavilion was packed at three o'clock that afternoon, and not just with us student pods. Mother Redd was there and so was Doctor Thomasin. We recognized several professors from the Institute, including Doctors Thackery and Charona.

We were in the biology section, so we sat through a dozen mice-in-maze and build-a-better-chlorophyll presentations until Candace's turn finally came.

She climbed the steps to the speaker's platform, looking pale and slouched.

*She's still sick*, we thought, touching palms so we didn't disturb anyone nearby.



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She plugged in her cube and the screen behind her erupted with the title of her project.

*She misspelled* ruficollis!

"Shh!"

"Sorry."

"I-I-I. . . ." Candace started. "I'm, I'm Candace Thurgood."

Then she changed interfaces in front of everyone and started again.

"I'm Candace Thurgood, and my presentation is . . ." She looked at the words on the screen behind her and paused.

She changed heads again, and this time I smelled the thoughts swirling around the auditorium.

"I'm Candace Thurgood and this is the title of my pr-pr-presentation."

She was shaking. Her face shone with sweat. She tapped the cube and the page started showing video of her ducks. If she was supposed to be narrating what was happening, she wasn't. She was just standing there.

*Oh, no. She's frozen up!*

Sixty seconds passed, and, finally, Doctor Thomasin stood up.

Candace stared at him as he climbed the steps; I smelled his calming scent from where I was. But I smelled Candace's fear too. She ran before her doctor reached her, dashing down the steps on the other side of the platform, heading for the door.

*Let's go!* I sent. *We need to help her.*

"The next presenter is Apollo Papadopulos."

*Our presentation is next!*

*But, she needs....*

We reached consensus and walked up to the platform.

It was just us and Mother Redd on the bus back to the farm that evening.

"I want to help look," Meda had said as we climbed aboard.

"Doctor Thomasin is doing everything that needs to be done."

"Okay." I was sure she caught our sullenness, mine especially. It weighed heavy on me that we had not gone after Candace. For all her annoying habits, she was still a friend going through a crisis, and no blue ribbon was worth a friend's pain.

*She's not our friend.*

I turned on Manuel and let loose with my anger. He shirked back from me, but held his call for consensus.

*Even if she isn't our friend, she still needs our help!* I sent.

I threw my ribbon at him. It missed and sailed to the front of the bus. Mother Redd glanced at it, then at us, but I didn't care, even when Strom filled the air with embarrassment.

*No one else stood up to help in that whole auditorium. No one. We should have.*

More embarrassment from Manuel and the others.

*She was scared. And she ran, because there was no one to help. And now she's missing!*

Finally they agreed. We sat in silence the rest of the way home.

At the house, there was a taxi bill in the house email account that we saw when we walked in the door.



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"She's here. She took a taxi," Meda said.

We checked her room, and the rest of the house, but there was nothing. We checked the barn and the labs. Mother Redd called Doctor Thomasin, and we started to check the lake, but stopped when Strom's duck quacked to be let out. Then the clutch rushed off toward the lake.

"Where are they going?"

"Apparently they aren't imprinted on Strom anymore."

Candace wasn't at the lake either. We stood, looking in six directions for some sign of her, some clue to where she was hiding.

*I hope she's okay.*

"Look!"

There coming out of the forest was a flock of ducks—our ducks; *all* our ducks.

"What are they doing?"

They waddled right up to us and began swarming around our legs.

"Oh, great. More imprinted ducks."

They began to quack, not individual dissonant sounds, but in unison: Quack, pause, quack, pause, quack, with the tempo slowly increasing.

Then they rushed back toward the forest. We followed.

*A flocking pod?*

We followed the flock into the brush, struggling to keep up with their orderly and low-to-the-ground progression. They were waddling through the brush more easily than we were walking.

Ahead, the woods broke into a clearing, and there was Candace, lying on the ground.

"Oh no!"

She was pale, every one of her, clammy to the touch. Her breathing was shallow.

*Look how thin her face seems.*

*Her skin looks like paper.* We could see the blue veins at her temples.

The ducks clustered around us as we checked her.

*Let's get her back to the house.*

We found an easier way back, and carried her to the house, three at a time, leaving the male for last. We hated breaking her up like that, but she was unconscious, and we had to get her to the house.

"Goodness!" Mother Redd said when she saw us. She directed us to the lab. It jolted us to see her behaving as a medical doctor; we thought of the quartet she had been as a doctor. The trio she was was an ecologist. I guess she was still a doctor, even though she had lost a quarter of herself. I wondered how much medical training had been lost when her fourth had expired. "Lay her on the table. Get the rest of her."

When we got back with the next three, Mother Redd had already begun running tests on her: hormone levels, blood tests, gene maps. When we got back with the last one, Mother Redd was on the vid to Doctor Thomasin.

"Her gene map has deviated from her norm. She appears to have applied transmogrifying sequences to herself, as recently as a week ago. The result is shock, renal failure, and seizures. Possibly shared memory degradation. I've called an ambulance."

His face looked shocked. "Why would she do such a thing?"



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*He's misleading us.*

I don't know why I thought it, but as soon as I did, the consensus formed behind it. None of us had had an inkling of his prevarication, but now it seemed obvious. We were built for intuitive leaps.

"I'll be there in half an hour."

Meda said, "How would her own doctor not know she's monkeying with her genome? She's been sick all summer." She said it softly, but loud enough for Mother Redd to hear.

One of her turned and looked directly at us. We met the gaze. She nodded slightly.

To Doctor Thomasin, she said, "The ambulance is already here. We're going to the county hospital."

"I'll meet you there." He signed off.

Mother Redd said, "Wait in the house, please."

"But—"

"Wait in the house."

We did, and, to pass the time, we ran searches on the legal and medical ramifications of postpartum genetic manipulation. Our children were built; it is a fact of our society. But the individual—the pod—is sacred, once it has pod-bonded. For his own reasons, Doctor Thomasin, who had built Candace, saw the need to change her still, to modify his creation.

*It's wrong.*

There was no doubt in our mind.

When the ambulance arrived, Mother Redd directed it to the Institute hospital instead of the county hospital.

Mother Redd relented and allowed us to come with her as she followed the ambulance in the aircar. She wouldn't let us drive, though we were checked out on the car, and had about ten times better reflexes than she did.

We sat in the waiting room while she consulted with the physicians at the Institute. We'd been in the Institute hospital only rarely; we'd had a single anatomy class the year before in one of the auxiliary buildings. Most of our classes were in engineering science, and we were rarely sick enough that we couldn't fix ourselves.

It was late, but we couldn't sleep. We kept checking with the floor AI to see if Candace's condition had changed. It hadn't.

Manuel gazed out the window at the dark buildings. The Institute looked desolate, and I doubted that anyone was on campus, certainly not students, and probably not teachers. Fall classes didn't start for another three weeks.

A door banged. We looked up, and there was Doctor Thomasin, pushing out of the stairwell. He'd run up the six flights of stairs instead of waiting for the elevator.

Without thinking, we formed up behind Strom, our defensive position.

He did a double take.

"I thought you took her to the county hospital," he said.

"We know what you did. Mother Redd knows," Meda said.

"What are you talking about?" Now that we knew how he lied, his bluffs were transparent.



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"You have been modifying her DNA all summer. You almost killed her."

"It's some problem with the DNA, sure. But *I* didn't modify it. Where is she?"

He tried to step around us, but we repositioned ourselves in front of him.

"Get out of my way, student!"

"We're not your student. We're human beings with full rights, just like Candace. But then you don't care about that, do you?"

For a second, I thought that he was going to strike at us, and I felt Strom determine the best defense, the best offense. For a moment, we were a matrix of possibility, a phalanx of potential.

"Gorgi, you better go."

It was Mother Redd, standing in the doorway of Candace's room.

"I just need to see her."

"No."

"I was just trying to make her *perfect,* don't you see?"

"I see."

"I have a responsibility to the future," he said. "We need to become a viable species. We're on the cusp. We're as near extinction as we've ever been, and *I* have got to save us!"

"Saving the human race through Candace is not your responsibility," Mother Redd said.

"*You* were responsible for Candace," we said. "But you failed." We were suddenly aware of all our responsibilities, to our friends, to ourselves, to our ducks: duties and relationships interwoven.

Doctor Thomasin looked at me. "I wanted to build something as good as you," he said.

"You did."

He held our look and we smelled his thoughts. After a moment, he nodded, then turned away.

We saw Candace once after she left the hospital. She came to the farm, and we showed her the duck pod: one hundred and fifty-seven ducks forming a single entity. We told her that we were going to publish a paper, and we wanted her to be coauthor.

"No thanks. I don't have anything to contribute."

We nodded, embarrassed. We'd forgotten that she'd lost a huge amount of pod memory with the last genetic modification.

"What are your plans then?"

"I'm thinking about medical school. I'll have to start a lot of studies from scratch, but I think I'd like to do that."

"That sounds good. You'll do well."

Her interface and Meda hugged, and then she finished packing her stuff. On the air pad, we said another awkward good-bye. We made sure she had our ID so she could write, but I had a feeling that she wasn't going to. I doubted that she wanted to remember this summer at all.

We watched the air car rise and depart.

*Time to check the ducks.*

*It's always time to check the ducks!*

So we did. O



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# A BIRTH

Carrie Richerson

**Carrie Richerson lives in Austin, Texas, that fermentation vat of SF writerly talent. She likes to set her stories under the big sky of her adopted republic where anything, even change, seems possible. She's been laboring in the short fiction field for a number of years now; this is her first story for *Asimov's*.**

He is so very pink, this new father-to-be.

So pink and scrubbed-looking, young and nervous.

I don't know if he is more nervous because he is waiting for news of his wife and child, or if it is because I am sitting here, waiting with him, the tension of my dislike thick in the air.

He sits rigidly upright in the worn plastic chair. His hands rest on his knees, he faces the far wall as though he were determined to be taken for a piece of furniture himself, a part of the landscape. Occasionally he will dare a look at me slideways, out of one of those large, liquid brown eyes of his, the ones that are set too far apart in his long, narrow face. He doesn't move his head at all, but I know that his attention never wavers from me. Whenever I shift, making my chair creak, or when I uncross my legs and cross them again the other way, the tips of his too-large ears, the ones set too high on his head, twitch. The comparison is unavoidable.

My daughter married a jackass.

I glance at the clock, knowing it will hardly have changed since the last time I looked. 3:48 A.M. It was a long labor, and the doctors shooed us out of Diana's room and into this bleak waiting area when it looked as if she was finally ready for delivery. Most fathers these days get to be right there for the birth, hold their wives' hands and listen to them grunt and yell, but the docs are taking no chances with this birth. Suits me just fine. There's something indecent about a man wanting to watch such women's work.

I look down from the clock to see that my hand has clenched on the brim of my hat again, crushing the straw and mangling the rolled edge. It'll have to be re-blocked after this night, if it can be saved at all. Maybe I should just get a new one, to celebrate the birth. Get a tiny little hat for the tyke, too. Start him out right as a cowboy. Or a cowgirl.



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I watch my fingers twist and crease the brim. My hand is as brown and leathery as the rawhide band that circles the crown on my Stetson. My knuckles are lumpy with arthritis; the skin is webbed with tiny cracks grimed with dirt that no soap can remove. The south Texas sun burns all the moisture out of a man. Maybe all the softness, too. Years under that sun, in the saddle day in and out, working the ranch and trying to make it pay, struggling through droughts and market busts and high taxes to preserve something real to pass on to my children. My one child. My daughter.

Who married this jackass.

He rolls that eye at me again and I give him a hard predator's glare right back. The hot pink shade of his hide looks like the sun has done a job on him already, but otherwise he seems too soft, too *wet*, to be a rancher. What was my daughter thinking?

The ears twitch. Jackass.

There's no one better with the cows, though. No one faster at spotting jimson weed in a pasture, or determining the exact moment to take the herd off a pasture where rain after a long drought has made the johnsongrass form toxic levels of prussic acid. And that long nose of his is good for something besides looking ridiculous: I swear he's diagnosed a cow with haemophilus infection just by smelling its breath, and more than once he's sniffed out a bad shipment of fescue hay and saved my cows from nitrate poisoning.

I watch him sometimes, in the dew-wet dawns and the gathering dusk, as he wanders among the cows, greeting each one by name. (I run two thousand head of Santa Gertrudis and eight hundred head of improved Charolais, and he's named every one.) His bright pink hands are a shocking contrast to the dark red Santa Gertrudis and the creamy Charolais as he runs them over the cows' hides, checking for bots and ticks. He squats to check their manure for worms without the slightest flicker of disgust. He sings to them in his soft little whispery voice. When I sent the yearlings north to the feedlots this spring, he cried.

The cows don't roll the whites of their eyes at him and shuffle away, as they do when I or the other cowhands walk among them. No, they lean in to him, rubbing against his shoulder in solidarity, nosing at those narrow pink hands to scratch behind their ears. I've seen my 2,200-pound Charolais bull follow him around the paddock like a puppy.

I think it's because he smells like them. Like a herbivore.

Like prey.

The air-conditioning sighs a cold, disinfected breeze. The clock ticks. My chair creaks. My son-in-law's ears twitch.

We wait.

A few nights ago, before Diana's labor began, I took my coffee and my prenatal anxieties out to the porch after dinner. I like to sit on the steps with the lights off and watch the stars in their grave dance across the sky as I plan the next day's work. That evening's weather report had noted a tropical depression forming in the Gulf two hundred miles southeast of Brownsville. If we were going to have a tropical storm or hurricane in the



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next week, the herds would have to be moved away from the creeks, and all the hay would have to be covered with tarps. I wanted to make sure I had thought of everything that would need to be done by the time I talked over the day's schedule with my foreman over breakfast.

The summer night's air was thick with the buzz of cicadas and the scents of sun-heated grass and cow manure. I could hear a few cows lowing restlessly, and, far off, the 9:05 freight out of Alice, bound for Benavides, Laredo, and Monterrey, Mexico. From around the corner on the south porch came the sounds of good-natured taunts and laughter that signaled the nightly poker game run by my ranch foreman, Juan Solis, with Matt, Sonny, and Pablo. Luis had brought out his twelve-string and was serenading them softly with sad Spanish love songs. The new hire, Juan Bautista, lounged dejectedly on the porch rail at the corner and sipped at a bottle of beer. No doubt he had just been told he was too junior to sit in the game.

Juan Solis had asked me to hire Juan Bautista because he was the son of a cousin who had passed away recently and the boy had dropped out of school to support his mother, but I knew Juan Solis wouldn't have asked if the boy weren't capable. He had worked hard that day, working the cows with the ease of one who had been minding cattle since he was old enough to sit on a horse. Which was probably the case. In this part of Texas, unless you want to hoof it down to the Rio Grande valley and spend your days stooped over hoeing onions, or ship out for three-week stints as a roustabout on an oil rig in the Gulf, there isn't much else but ranch work. And though I may keep vaccination records and breeding histories on a computer now, and we use pickup trucks in addition to the horses, the essential relationship between man and cow hasn't changed since humans first learned to be herders.

The boy had behaved well over dinner, too. He knew enough to scrape off his boots and wash his hands before sitting at table; he listened much and said little, which indicated a bit of sense; and though he was obviously both fascinated by and wary of my son-in-law, he held his tongue and didn't stare overmuch.

Through it all, Diana's husband sat placidly chewing his roasted grains and vegetables with those big, square, white teeth of his. He is inordinately fond of spinach, and now cook serves it at every dinner. I can't abide the stuff myself, it's too much like eating the cows' hay, but some of the cowhands have developed a liking for it. And Diana, of course, always offers me the serving bowl, with an innocent tone in her voice and a spark in her eye.

After dinner, my son-in-law had helped Diana up from the table and off to bed. She moved ponderously, cradling her great belly with both hands. I remembered how Maria's temper, at this point in her pregnancy, had become as fiery as her favorite *chiles rojas*. Diana, in contrast, seemed subdued, past patience and well into resignation, filled with a weary disgust for her condition.

Her husband came out onto the porch and settled into a rocking chair in the deep shadows, next to the house wall. He explained once that it's not that he minds the night so much, he just doesn't like to be out under



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that star-filled sky. Just as well. I didn't have to pretend to carry on a conversation with him.

I saw Juan Bautista turn to look when the screen door closed. He slid off the porch rail and disappeared in the direction of the game. I could hear a murmur of voices, but not what was being discussed. Then I heard the screen door on the south side of the house slam.

A few minutes passed. The stars twinkled in silence, the rocking chair squeaked in slow rhythm, cicadas shrilled, a train's diesel engine chugged almost too low to hear, and Luis picked out a melody that Maria used to sing to Diana when she was small.

Then the south porch screen door slammed again, and Juan Bautista came around the corner. His boot heels rapped smartly against the mesquite porch planks as he strode toward me. In the light that leaked around the corner from the south porch, I could see that two beer bottles dangled from his left hand; he cradled something lumpy in his right.

I was afraid he was going to try to be sociable, but he nodded respectfully to me on the steps and kept going until he reached the figure in the rocker. The squeaking stopped.

Juan Bautista said, "*Buenas noches, amigo*. My cousin, Juan Solis—" he shrugged in the direction of the game, "he says you like plantains."

A voice from the shadows said, "I do."

"He said you like to eat them raw?" Juan Bautista sounded skeptical.

"Yes. I do like them like that."

Juan Bautista offered a small bunch of the fruit and didn't flinch as the eight-fingered hand reached out of the dimness to take it. The boy hooked a chair closer with the toe of his boot and straddled it. "*Cerveza*?"

"Thank you."

I heard two soft pops, then the *tink*, *tink* of bottle caps hitting the porch boards.

Juan took a long swig of his beer. "My cousin says you don't mind talking about the place you came from. I'd like to hear about your home, *por favor*."

fLaar finished one plantain and began to peel another. "All right."

"If you point one of your most powerful telescopes at the group of stars you call *La Virgen* and look to the left of the bright star you call Spica—but much farther away—you will just be able to see a small, yellow star: a star very similar to this one you call *El Sol*. The telescope would not be able to show you, but that star had planets, eight of them. On one of those planets, the fourth from its sun, life evolved.

"From space that planet looked more gray and brown than your blue and green Earth; it was a little less dense than your Earth and therefore its gravity a little less than here; the atmosphere had a slightly different mix of gases, and the oceans a different mix of salts, but you would have been able to breathe the air and drink the fresh water safely. I think you would have found it pleasant. I think you would have found it beautiful.

"That star's spectrum of light was a little different than your sun's, and the gases in the planet's atmosphere scattered and absorbed that light differently, so the chemicals that evolved in plants to turn that light into



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food were different also. On my planet, the vegetation was mostly red rather than this Earth's green. All the shades of red, from pink to scarlet, and from bronze to almost purple.

"That planet had mountains, with tall peaks covered in snow year-round. There were deep crimson jungles and great rivers and deserts and lakes. But the most beautiful areas were the vast plains of pink and rust grasses, dotted with rocky hills and small forests of trees with leaves the color of blood.

"Here in Texas you have a mythical beast, the jackalope—yes?" Juan Bautista snorted and slapped his knee. fLaar continued, "Without a smile you tell newcomers it is a cross between a jackrabbit and an antelope. Well, imagine a real animal that looks like a cross between your jackrabbit and a baboon—you have seen pictures of a baboon?"

Juan Bautista nodded.

"Like the jackrabbit, this animal had large ears and a large nose, to hear and smell predators that might sneak up through the tall grass. Like the jackrabbit and the baboon, this animal could sit up on its haunches, even stand on its hind legs for short periods, to look over those tall grasses. Like the baboon, it lived in troops of twenty to two hundred individuals. These were well-organized social groups, with leaders, scouts, nursemaids, defenders, and food gatherers. This animal even had a rudimentary language, several octets of vocalizations and signs that could be used to express surprisingly complex concepts. And like the baboon, it was intelligent enough to learn to use simple tools to acquire food or defend itself.

"Our studies indicated this was a peaceful and cooperative animal. When different troops encountered one another in their wanderings across the plains, they did not fight—they traded. They mingled together for days or weeks, sharing knowledge, like where the best nut trees or the tastiest grasses or the sweetest springs were to be found, and skills, like how to use a pair of stones to crack the hardest nuts, or how to carry a supply of seeds in a hollow gourd. And when the troops parted again and went off in opposite directions, some members of each would have switched troops, forming new kinships. So, in time, genetics and knowledge were spread over the entire species.

"This was the animal that was the ancestor of the vRel."

I let fLaar's story fade into a background drone. I had heard or read all of this before. When the vRel first showed up, I was as fascinated and alarmed as everyone else on Earth, but the vRel did everything they could to convince humans they were neither hoax nor invader. As soon as their spaceship neared the orbit of the moon, they began broadcasting their peaceful intentions in every major Earth language. They followed up by dumping all of their knowledge and history, all their science and culture, their medicine and their mathematics, directly into the world-wide computer network.

In return all they asked was refuge. And they made their appeal not to the governments of the world, but to the people directly, *all* of the people, simultaneously.



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Most of us were content to read about them in newspapers and take advantage of the advancements in science and medicine that their knowledge promised. But some daring souls responded to the vRel plea with invitations. "Come down and live with us," they said. They wanted to know the vRel "up close and personal," as it were.

If I had had any idea Diana was one such . . .

The first I knew of her plan was when I answered a knock on the front door one evening to find a hideously pink alien carrying a small satchel of his personal effects standing on the welcome mat. "Hello, I am fLaar. Miss Diana Murchison invited me," he said, sticking out that strange hand. How do you shake a hand that has two thumbs?

That was two years ago, and, as God is my witness, if I had known just how *personal* Diana intended her sponsorship of fLaar to be—well, I'd have run him off the porch with my shotgun.

The scientists say it is not really possible to compare vRel and human history because time gets muddled over such great distances. Damned if I understand what they are talking about. To me it just seems clear that the vRel had a head start on humans in the civilization game. According to what I've read, the vRel were mastering tool-making and learning to use fire while the ancestors of humans were still nesting in trees. When we were learning to use big sticks to bash animals and each other over the head, the vRel were inventing agriculture, pottery, and weaving. While humans built the Pyramids and waged wars of conquest, the vRel built great cities and waged war on disease and age. fLaar may look young, but he is older than I like to contemplate. Thanks to vRel medicine, my arthritis is yielding to treatment, the spot my doctor found on my lung last year has cleared up, and, barring accident, I will almost certainly live to see the twenty-second century. Diana and her child will live longer yet.

And while humans were proving their world was indeed round, the vRel had already explored their own solar system and were looking outward to the stars.

Some wistful note in fLaar's voice drew me back to his narrative. "We knew it would take many years for ships to travel to even the nearest stars, but by that time we had extended our lifetimes many times over our ancestors', and we are patient by nature. We could imagine no greater project than to search out other intelligent life and exchange knowledge. But then our scientists made two discoveries that would forever change us as a people."

"*¿Qué?*" asked Juan Bautista.

"First, they developed a way to shorten the travel time by shortening the distance, as though one could make a fold in the fabric of space itself and bring two places that are far apart, close together for just an instant. The limitation of the speed of electromagnetic radiation became irrelevant. Hundreds, even thousands of years could be trimmed from a journey.

"That discovery overjoyed us, and we immediately began to fit the



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spaceships we had begun to build with new engines to take advantage of this technology.

"The second discovery followed hard up on the first, but brought grief instead of gladness. Our astronomers announced our sun had developed a subtle instability, one that would cause its violent destruction in the near future. We had a few hands of years, maybe only two octets, before our beloved planet, our entire system, would be incinerated.

"The news was staggering, but we quickly realized now we had even more reason to travel to the stars. Somewhere out there must be a new home for our race. Every vRel threw itself into the common task. We built enormous fleets of starships, holding thousands of individuals apiece, and launched them outward in different directions to find a place of refuge.

"Whichever fleet found a likely planet would send one ship back as a messenger, and all future refugees would know the path to our new home. Other messengers could be sent to find the other fleets and share the news with them.

"But no messengers ever came bringing news of a new home.

"So we continued to build fleets of ships and send our population outward with only hope to guide us. We had always been careful stewards of our planet's resources, treating her with the respect one owes one's mother, but now we despoiled her without remorse. We gouged great pits into her surface as we mined for ores, poisoned our air with the fumes from our smelters, stained our seas and lakes black with waste. Entire cities were emptied and their buildings ripped apart for metals and ceramics for our ships, and the populace of those cities put on those ships and sent away. And when our own planet's resources grew too low to sustain our frantic construction, we plundered the other planets in our system for material.

"Millions of vRel left. Millions more decided their love of our home was too great to allow them to leave. They chose to stay and share our planet's fate. I was one who would have stayed. I was only sixteen when my turn came to leave, in the twelfth great migration. I loved my home very much, but my entire family, hundreds of individuals, had voted to go, and I could not bear to be parted from them.

"When we left, our sun had already begun to take on an ugly mottled appearance that could be seen in full daylight; its face was blotched with enormous sunspots and flares. It was clear the end was not far away. My last view of my home, from orbit, was of a planet raped and scarred, already dying. I do not know how many more of the vRel left after we did. Those who chose to stay until the end must have wept for the destruction we left behind.

"Our fleet numbered just over two hundred ships, containing three-quarters of a million vRel. We charted a path not taken by earlier fleets and set out for the nearest likely star. It had no planets, so we jumped again. And again.

"We surveyed thousands of stars, with thousands of planets. We found frozen balls of methane and ammonia ice like your planet Pluto, massive giants of incredible gravity and swirling, toxic gases like your Jupiter, and half-molten rocks like your Mercury. But never did we find a planet suitable for our new home.



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"After many disappointments, the fleet split, then split again and again as factions differed over what course to take through a galaxy of hundreds of billions of stars. We lost some ships to accidents, like the *naFisk*, which, without warning, blew apart into fragments no larger than my hand. We found no survivors and we never learned the cause. Other ships were lost to madness or hopelessness, like the *dRanoth*, when its crew opened its hatches to space. I lost my last clan sister when the *dRanoth* died.

"At the last only my ship, the *kRovv,* remained. For almost a thousand years we had wandered in a drunkard's stagger across the galaxy. I think we were close to ending ourselves as those on the *dRanoth* had—and then, out of all that emptiness, we detected a whisper of a pattern in the electromagnetic spectrum, and followed it here, to your planet.

"Only three thousand vRel, of all the millions who left vRelhome, made it here. But for all our persistence, I do not think there are enough of us left to continue as a people."

Juan Bautista drank off the last of his beer and carefully set the bottle down beside his boot. He seemed unwilling to break the silence that had fallen. Finally fLaar spoke again. "Somewhere there may be a thousand planets where vRel have found homes, but I do not think so. Space is vast, vaster than you can imagine. And more barren. And lonelier. You humans are welcome to our technology, to whatever you may find among the stars. We are old and tired. We never want to look upon the stars again."

Last fall Diana took fLaar to the McDonald Observatory in west Texas to view his home star through one of the telescopes there. She explained to me that it is still visible, even though it was destroyed almost a thousand years ago, because it takes the light so long to travel to Earth. fLaar came back weeping, and did not leave his room for days.

I checked my watch: 9:50. Almost time. I looked to the west, where Venus glowed like a silver concho nailed to the sky. I wondered what it would be like to be a thousand years old. What if I could have been present to see all the changes that had taken place over the last thousand years of human history? How amazing that would have been. But fLaar wasn't witness to a thousand years of vRel history—just a thousand years of boredom and frustration and despair.

And now there were only three thousand vRel. Only a few more than all the cattle I run. And if I didn't breed out my bulls, and stock fresh cows from time to time, my herds would decline, become inbred and sickly. Eventually a parasite or a disease would sweep through and wipe them all out.

In the sky, a handspan to the right of Venus, a new light suddenly flared gold. Swiftly it climbed across the sky like a falling star in reverse, then winked out at the zenith. The vRel spaceship, refitted for a human crew of six hundred forty men and women and renamed *Discovery*, had just departed Earth's neighborhood on its first journey of exploration.

I threw the last of my cold coffee into the grass and stood up. "We have an early morning, gentlemen. Juan Bautista, mind your empties."

"*Si, señor.*" He gathered up the bottles and turned to go, then turned back to fLaar. "*Gracias, señor,*" he said. "I am sorry for your loss. We have a beautiful planet, too. I hope you will be happy here."



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He left. I stood looking at fLaar in the dimness for a moment longer. I could just see the gleam of his huge eyes looking back at me. I went inside to bed. I don't know when fLaar turned in.

A nurse sticks her head into the waiting room and says we can see Diana now. I'm down the hallway like a shot, fLaar and the nurse trotting just to stay in my wake. At the doorway to Diana's room, I stop so suddenly that fLaar plows into my back. He snorts and leaps away, the whites of his eyes showing, but I only have eyes for my daughter.

Diana looks like she's been ridden hard. She's pale, except for the dark circles around her eyes, and the bright lights in the room gleam off a film of sweat on her skin. But she is triumphantly, glowingly happy. She looks up from the gurgling bundle in her arms and sends me a proud, fierce glare, and I nod in acknowledgment of this woman's work well done, this result of her daring vision and unbending will, the advances in genetics the vRel have brought us, and the doctors' patient engineering.

She hands the baby to the nurse, who puts it into my arms. The nurse is murmuring something about how they think it is a girl, but these matters are complicated among the vRel, so they are running some tests. I'm not listening; as soon as I look into the tiny face, I know I have a granddaughter.

She stares up at me with her mother's fierce blue eyes and I remember the first time Maria put our new daughter into my arms—and I am lost. The eyes are too large, but they are set in the front of the face. The skin seems too pink, but that could be from the birthing. The ears are large, but perhaps not too large. The hands are very narrow, but they have only five fingers apiece, fingers that try to curl around my massive, dirt-seamed one.

She is beautiful. She gives me a milky, toothless grin, and I know that someday her smile will break human and vRel hearts alike.

fLaar is still standing in the doorway, shifting nervously from foot to foot. I turn to him, and this time I do not give him a predator's toothy smile, but something more genuine—a sincere, if ironic, smile of welcome: welcome to the fathers' club, to dreams and midnight dreads, to toil and trouble, to pride and sorrow, to disasters survived and triumphs shared, and to the ultimate dismay of having your daughter marry a man you disapprove of. *Yes, all this will be yours.*

He is wary of the promise he sees in my eyes, though it is not me he has to worry about. "What . . . what is it?" he whispers.

I put his daughter into his arms. "Something new," I say. O

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**Brenda Cooper and Larry Niven have published collaborative fiction in *Asimov's* and *Analog* for the past four years. The two authors have also written a novel, *Building Harlequin's Moon,* which has just been published by Tor Books. Brenda Cooper's solo science fiction and fantasy stories have appeared in *Analog, Strange Horizons, Oceans of the Mind,* and in several anthologies. Brenda lives in Bellevue, Washington, and serves as the City of Kirkland CIO. Multiple Hugo- and Nebula-award winning author Larry Niven lives in Chatsworth, California, with his wife Marilyn, a cat, Amelia, and a dozen unnamed koi. He has been a published author for forty-one years. Together, he and Brenda, take us on a stunning tour of Mercury and a desperate attempt to save the lives of . . .**

# KATH AND QUICKSILVER

Larry Niven

&

Brenda Cooper

Kathlerian looked out at black rocks and a glowing horizon. They had been dusted with frost when she first arrived at Midnight Dome, seventeen standard years ago. The frost was gone now. "Joplee," she said, "Let's go out."

Joplee turned a silvered blue visual sensor toward her. "No."



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"You've *never* let me outside. You used to tell me it was too cold. It's warm enough now!"

"Kathlerian, dear, it's too dangerous."

The sun never rose over Midnight Dome on Mercury. There was no sense of time, and yet everyone was in a frantic hurry. Some were observing the sun while Noonpoint's ancient array of instruments was still in place: last chance before the expanding sun melted or burned them. Most were preparing for departure.

Kathlerian had nothing to do with solar observations or the exodus. She'd helped tend the Vivarium—farming—but that was shut down now. She missed the jungle section and the animals. Now there was nothing to occupy her time. She had to do *something*.

"Joplee, how long has it been since an environment suit failed?"

"Eleven hundred eighteen standard years," Joplee said promptly. "Veriority Claust Kerry 7122, on Earth. Quick rescue allowed her to be regenerated. She presently lives at Dub City on—"

"And the temperature out there lists as benign!"

"Briefly, Kath. Midnight Dome has been the coldest place on Mercury since Mercury stopped rotating. Ever since the Turnover Period these rocks have been at around ninety degrees absolute, as cold as Pluto and Charon once were. A billion years and more. Even when you first came here at age fourteen, these rocks were below the freezing point of carbon dioxide. In a Mercury year they'll be glowing. In fifty they'll be traces of gas inside the Sun."

"So it's our last chance!" she said triumphantly.

"We're already in the outer traces of the Sun's atmosphere. Can you see how rounded the rocks have become?" Joplee superimposed blue pointers on parts of the landscape. "High-velocity gasses would etch away any protection we can build. We might also risk missing our departure window."

"If I went out, you'd have to come with me."

"You will not go," Joplee said. "The *Naglfar Marui* is nearly ready to load. It's the last evac pod. We must board or be left behind. Find some other form of entertainment, Kathlerian."

Kath nodded stiffly, turning to face the wall. A swivel stool rose from the floor just behind her feet. At her command the wall dimpled into an alcove and extruded a monitor screen and touchboard. She set to work. Maybe she could get something done this way, if Joplee didn't catch on.

Eighty or so pink dwarves swarmed past, paying her no attention at all.

Two augmented humanoids made an alcove, stepped into it, and folded into each other's arms. Kathlerian heard a rapid clicking. For a moment she wished, wistfully, that Jerian would allow her to grow up. She'd been a little girl for thirty-one years: quite long enough, thank you.

There weren't many people left on Mercury: thirty-four thousand and some. Passersby were rare. Everyone without a physical body had left, the last ten standard months ago.

A silver egg zipped down the corridor at eighty or ninety KPS and stopped jarringly. Zesh Folty 12 poked her mirror-silvered head through



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the egg's surface. "Kathlerian 771, the *Naglfar Marui* will be departing in one hundred hours," she said.

"I'll be ready."

"Kath, it's the absolutely last ship. We're using the last of the antimatter, dear," her featureless face watching her anxiously, as if Kath really were ten years old.

Old people could become timid. Zesh dreaded being left behind to broil. It was an obsession. Kath concentrated on her monitor screen until the egg zipped away.

She was trying to contact Jerian Wale 9000.

Jerian was Kathlerian's never-seen guardian. She pictured him as thousands of years old, maybe millions. She'd wondered if she might be his specific N-child, a direct descendant. Then again, he seemed to be running the entire human control group, the Bear Clade, tens of millions strong and billions of years old in design. Kath was in the Bear Clade. All she really knew was that Jerian controlled her destiny.

Jerian didn't want more Bear Clade children. That was why Kathlerian wasn't growing up: he had altered her biochemistry to leave her as a little girl until she completed her pre-college education. And Joplee's mind was a dumbed-down copy of Jerian's, though Joplee looked more like a skeletal bird of metal and plastic, a forest of appendages and sensors.

The last order she'd gotten from Jerian was to leave Mercury on the *Naglfar Marui*.

Jerian had left Mercury seven years ago to organize the exodus: find places for people, fit them to tasks, a thousand concerns for millions of citizens departing Mercury in such a way as to leave order behind and machinery still running. He'd had time, then, but the exodus had now grown urgent. Getting his attention might be difficult.

The sun's adolescence was billions of years in the past. Sol was a red giant and still expanding. Mercury was orbiting within the sun's outer envelope and would soon be swallowed. A cautious old entity would be elsewhere! If Jerian Wale had fled to some other world, he'd be minutes away at lightspeed, or hours. Refugees were piling up on Pluto and Charon, more than ten hours distant via lightspeed communication.

She decided not to wait for a response. Jerian never let her do what she wanted anyway. He usually didn't even answer her. Where was Joplee?

Just behind her, watching what she did. She summoned up a work in progress, then spoke over her shoulder. "Joplee, would you get me a meal? Midmorning snack. You choose."

"I will," Joplee said. He didn't move.

Kathlerian summoned up a file two years old. It was bulky. She had researched Jerian Wale 9000, and various electronic personalities, and Joplee himself.

Of Jerian she'd learned little. Then again, the library gave her the same lack of response to questions regarding the AIs who ran various transport systems. That told her Jerian was important, a possible target for paparazzi or terror bards. She'd probed the edges of his data firewall and found enough to awe her.



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Of electronic personalities there was too much information. They were everywhere in the solar system and beyond. In complexity they ran the gamut from a simple sewer system or air travel monitor through Joplee and his kind to the transcendentally intelligent AIs. Their kind couldn't even be counted: they merged and fissioned at will, merging to share information, dividing to perform multiple tasks.

Joplee wasn't an AI. He was only her nursemaid and guardian. Kathlerian could often talk him around to her viewpoint, but there was a point at which he stopped listening, stopped responding. Maybe his programming wasn't flexible. Maybe the original Jerian was just that way.

What she'd found about Joplee had set her giggling.

That was almost a standard year ago. She'd been gaining weight, then. The submind in charge of resource allotment in Midnight Dome had set her on a diet. Tired of the sameness, she'd made a tiny alteration in Joplee's programming.

How many people would notice that Joplee could no longer choose a meal? He'd loop until Kath chose for him. Now he looped while Kathlerian worked her way into a new program.

What showed in the wall screen was a complicated three-dimensional shape. It turned, changed, zoomed or shrank as Kathlerian stabbed at it with a virtual cursor.

"Hello, Kathlerian 771. What are you doing?"

The voice was cheery, perhaps childish. Kath jumped violently. Her ears curled into tight little knots in a reflex as old . . . no, not as old as humankind, but as old as the Bear Clade.

"Just playing," she said, and looked around. Nobody. There weren't any other children in Midnight Dome. "Who speaks?"

"I'm Quicksilver. You are playing with an almost intelligent being. Be careful." The voice came from her monitor screen, with a second's delay. She found that odd. Electronic intelligences thought almost instantaneously.

She snapped, "I saved Joplee in memory. What are you, Quicksilver?"

"Do you know Mercury? The iron core is almost the entire planet. Sol's magnetic fields interact strongly with the core—"

"I know all that."

"I was a man once. Widge Hordon of the Vance Clade, plasma physics, pleased to meet you. I let my colleagues record my mind and impose me on Mercury's magnetic field."

Kathlerian continued her work. She asked, "How do you expect to be evacuated?"

"I am Mercury. When Mercury goes, I go. Will you keep talking to me, Kathlerian? I'm lonely."

Kathlerian shuddered at the thought of spending her last few hours on Mercury talking to a doomed entity. "Is that why you're so slow? You're a pattern written into this random ball of dirty iron?"

"That and the magnetic fields, the flux tube that runs from the sun to Mercury's core."

"There's something I've got to do," she said. The changes in Joplee were almost finished.



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When she finished she was ravenous. She turned off the monitor and the wall absorbed it. "Joplee, order me a veg handmeal and a brown shake."

"Done."

"Joplee, let's go out."

"Yes. The nearest airlock is this way." Markers glowed in the floor. Joplee drifted that way.

"Are there suits?"

"No." Joplee didn't stop.

"I'll have to be fitted. Guide me to a tailor. Have the meal delivered there." The floor marks changed. Kathlerian was giddy. This seemed too easy.

The tailor shop was next to the A4 personal airlock. Nobody was on duty. Her meal arrived while she worked.

What she wanted was easily ordered, but she was surprised at what emerged. The suit was thick-walled foam, with a feathery spine and a considerable weight of motor. Cooling system, she thought. It was little-girl sized. It fit her like a work mitten: cumbersome, restrictive, cozy.

She stepped through the lock and out onto Mercury.

The sky was black. The horizon glared. A crater rim surrounded Midnight Dome. The black rocks had a half-melted look. Low hills crept away from the dome, dark on dark humps rising to meet the edge of a crater. She felt a moment of triumph. She'd beaten Joplee.

Riding lights flared from a huge lens shape to her right.

That was the evac pod named *Naglfar Marui*. It looked half as big as Midnight Dome, with capacity for forty thousand. When formed it had been mostly empty shell. Everyone, even Kath, had had a hand in shaping the interior. The AIs had vetoed some bulky, silly suggestions, but interior space had filled up nonetheless. Kath's quarters would be cramped and spartan. She dreaded spending thirty standard days in this thing.

Bent rainbow flames stretched from the horizon halfway to the black zenith. The sun itself was still hidden; so what was this wavering glare? Zodiacal light? Unnamed magnetic effects? "Joplee," she said, and realized for the first time that her nursemaid hadn't followed her.

"Yes," said Joplee's voice.

"Come out," she said.

"I am not protected against thermal radiation or magnetic devil knots."

Another voice spoke: Quicksilver. "Kathlerian, what are you doing?"

"I didn't call you," she said.

Silence.

"It's my last chance to explore Mercury," she said. "Wh—?"

"You can't go anywhere interesting on foot! Design a vehicle."

What was Quicksilver doing on her talker? But the mystery voice was right; she'd need a vehicle to get anywhere. Besides, unlike Joplee, he wasn't fighting her, and he wasn't mentally crippled. She smiled and went back in.

Her credit held. The thirty-four thousand entities left behind at Mid-



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night Dome were rich: they commanded the resources of Sol's innermost planet, a treasure built up over billions of years. Kathlerian chafed at the time and cost required to build a vehicle. But she had time, and what did cost matter now?

She started with a bubble heavily shielded against radiation. She gave it pods to extrude tractor treads, paddles, wheels, mag coils. One protean couch for a small human being and a niche for Joplee. A big airlock. Like her suit, the design grew a feather plume to radiate heat. Power source with a fleck of antimatter in it. The thing grew larger with each of Quicksilver's suggestions. Kitchen box, medical inputs in the couch, and a niche for her bulky EVA suit. Automatic darkening of the bubble wall, with an override. In the image it now looked like a tremendous old war helmet.

"Mercury wasn't always like this," Quicksilver said.

She had already trusted Quicksilver for help on the ship. He *had* made some suggestions that improved her safety. Joplee wasn't making suggestions at all, and that, in its way, was scary. She'd succeeded too well. She must constantly remember that she had overwritten Joplee's nursemaid urge.

Quicksilver said, "When I first came here, the planet was tidally locked in a two-to-three spin ratio. The effective day was twice as long as the year. Over a day you could see the sun grow and shrink and do a weird kind of a loop—"

"Good enough, Joplee. Build it. Quicksilver, if that crazy orbit was stable—it *was* stable, wasn't it? What could knock a whole planet off balance?"

"A magnetic storm in the sun. A chaos effect, unpredictable. We were lucky to get any warning at all. I missed some of what came after. The storm screwed up the flux lines between the sun and Mercury's core. I went into a coma."

"Mmm."

"I lost over a million years there. But when the fields settled down, when I rebooted, Mercury was one-to-one stable. One face always to the Sun . . . wobbling a little, though. And Earth was resettled, and Mars—"

"Earth is empty now."

"There are still research stations on and around Earth. Stations on Venus too."

The controls were daunting. She rolled the bubble ship out through an extruded airlock. She stowed Joplee in his niche, an egg in a cup, leaving most of his arms free. Under the zodiacal glare she spent a few minutes reviewing the instructions.

She asked, "Joplee, how long before *Naglfar* leaves?"

"Seventy-one hours, Kathlerian."

"Do a countdown for me. I want to see what I can of Mercury. How far will the mag coils take me?"

"Fifty to sixty thousand kilometers."

Several times around Mercury. She could still trust Joplee to protect himself, couldn't she? "Quicksilver, what have I *got* to see?"

"Caloris Basin and the Hot Spot, at least, and the Hoplisht Rill. I'll guide you." A dotted green line superimposed itself on the glaring landscape, stretching over the horizon.



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She took the bubble ship up. As she rose, the rim of the sun appeared. The bubble darkened a little. The sun's rim was a bright red line storm with glimpses of yellow within, edging along a considerable span of horizon. She scooted away at the listed cruising speed, a hundred kilometers an hour, passing over dark circles upon dark circles, eons old.

Now she heard a whisper of wind. The cooling system hadn't been needed much until now. Motors pumped heat out through the plume, which glowed orange. A prominence lifted thousands of kilometers out from the sun, streaming, arching higher, reaching toward Mercury.

Joplee said, "Seventy hours."

The land was all craters and cracks. "Quicksilver, what's with all the canyons?"

"Oh, that's interesting, Kath. The early Mercury shrank as it cooled, of course, and the surface wrinkled a little. With almost no atmosphere the ridges don't erode very much. The thing is, it didn't wrinkle much either. The core never shrank enough for that. It's stayed molten for ten billion years."

"What's wrong with that? Mercury is right up against the sun."

"That's only since the sun's been expanding. It's a small planet, Kath. It would have lost that internal heat before there was a single human species. What keeps it molten is the sun's magnetic field interacting with the iron core."

"And that's you, Quicksilver?"

"Well, the flux tube was in place before I was, but I'm in there now. Picture my memory stored in core and my mind reaching through the magnetic lines toward the sun. Kath, that line of rock is part of the Hoplisht Rill." A cursor danced along the horizon.

"You talk like a teaching program."

"I was a teacher." The whisper of cooling had become a hum, and Quicksilver's voice rose. "After I chose this, I was a celebrity, the Mercury Mind. I was the ultimate data source for studies of the planet. We studied Sol too. But eventually there wasn't anything more for me to learn. So I taught visitors, children and adults. Teacher and guide."

"What's that?" She used the controls to put a cursor mark on what she'd seen on the surface. "Iron crab? It's as big as Midnight Dome!"

"No, not quite, but there are nine of those on Mercury. Mining systems from the Shibano Dynasty, each of them a little different. That's part of why people came to Mercury, Kath. Metals. They'd sink a shaft into the iron and siphon what they needed. Eventually the shaft would close again. They didn't want just iron, they wanted some of the impurities, so they sank shafts in different places."

"These drills still work?"

"Let me see." A pause of several seconds. "That one does . . . and . . . four of them still come on."

The sun was a great red arc with a fuzzy, hazy rim. Mercury wasn't big; two hundred klicks could take you a long way around its curve. A wall rose over the horizon. She asked, "Caloris Basin?"

"Yes. Do you know what a planetesimal is?"



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"Big mass, from when the solar system was just condensing. Enough planetesimals crashed together gives us planets."

"Yes. A planetesimal hit the Earth and gouged out a ring of debris that condensed into the Earth's Moon. Another one hit here and made Caloris Basin. But look at how regular it is, Kath." Caloris was a perfect circle around a nearly smooth floor. There were thousands of craters inside it, the marks of later strikes, but of large craters there were none.

"Whatever hits Mercury hits hard," Quicksilver said. "Anything that gets this deep in the sun's gravity well has huge kinetic energy. The strike that made the Caloris impact must have made a very hot fireball. It didn't rise, not in vacuum. It would have hovered like a flaming leech, melting everything."

Kath tried to imagine it. Then, "Show me."

"I picture it like—" The image formed slowly, then lurched into motion. A small moonlike body flew tumbling from offstage, glowed at its forward rim, and struck. A hemisphere rose glare white and symmetric from a darkened primordial landscape. "—like this." It expanded to engulf Kath's viewpoint, and now they were inside the fireball. Rock sprayed.

Kath tired of being blind. "Enough."

Black sky, tongues of corona, red sun. The bubble ship continued its descent into Caloris Basin. Kath spotted a silver crab-shape near the rim.

Quicksilver said, "Red giant stars aren't as well behaved as we once thought."

"Oh?"

A glare-white storm was rising from the red arc of the sun. The vehicle's drive stuttered.

"Quicksilver?"

The voice of Quicksilver was silent.

"Joplee, land us safely."

The bubble ship's drive steadied, then drove hard. Kath sagged in her couch. It reclined her, enclosed her tenderly. She spoke with difficulty. "Joplee, what's going on?"

"A solar storm, Kath. Let me work. If I can't compensate for this mag whorl, we'll tumble."

"How's the radiation level?"

"High and growing, but it's no threat to me."

"What about me?"

"It will kill you in perhaps twenty hours."

"Joplee, land us near that digging machine."

The bubble ship surged sideways, then back. It came down with a jolt. Kathlerian felt small next to the iron crab.

"Kathlerian?"

"Quicksilver! Where did you go?"

"Magnetic fields disordered me. It could happen again. Kathlerian, you're endangered. Radiation—"

"I thought maybe I could dig in. Quicksilver, can you start that digging machine?"

"No, I don't have any such control over Mercury's industrial facilities. Work through Joplee."



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"Joplee, I want to dig a big hole, fast. Can you—?"

Dirt sprayed back from the huge machine, jetting into the sky. Joplee said, "This is expensive, Kath."

"Give me a depth reading."

"The machine had already dug point eleven kilometers down when it was stopped. Now point fifteen."

"Quicksilver, does that look deep enough?"

"Go for point three klicks. Then get into it quickly."

The machine had gone in at an angle. Kath settled the bubble ship into the black depths, extruded tractor treads and rolled under the digging machine. Its huge mass would be some protection too.

The vehicle's air conditioning hummed, but the feather plume wasn't dumping heat into black sky any more. Hot rock surrounded them. The cabin grew warm.

Joplee was cut off from the Midnight Dome. He could still monitor radiation, still keep time.

Quicksilver went silent.

Kath waited with dwindling patience through fifty hours underground. Then Joplee announced, "Twenty hours to departure. Kath, radiation levels are falling."

"Safe enough for me?"

"That depends on your purpose. If you intend to return to Midnight Dome, then the shielding will hold at present levels. To circle Mercury would certainly kill you. Do you want to be told this kind of thing?"

"Yes." The altered Joplee knew what the old Joplee knew, except to protect her. Maybe if she knew what to ask, he could help save her after all.

The bubble ship's magnetic lift system wouldn't lift.

Kath tried not to think about what that meant. She extended tractor treads and crawled out of the slanting hole and into the glare. The sun didn't look much different from when she had last seen it, but now it seemed scary. She extended wheels and set off around the curve toward Mercury's dark backside. Her explorations had missed most of the planet.

Twenty hours later she saw a silver lens lift above the close black horizon. Joplee had finished his countdown: she knew what to expect. She zoomed the forward view and saw *Naglfar Marui* pause above the glaring mountains, then dwindle rapidly against the black sky.

They'd left her. She was angry, then ashamed, then—"Joplee, can you call *Naglfar*?"

"Yes. Whom will you speak to?"

"Anyone."

She got Zesh Folty. The silver egg was hysterical with relief, then horror. "But you're trapped!"

"Can someone send a lifeboat back for me?"

"Oh, Kath, we can't interrupt the systems. Mercury's already in the photosphere. *Naglfar Marui* is our last chance. We looked for you. Have you tried to reach your, um, protector?"

"Jerian? No, I called you first." Jerian would be furious. Or indifferent.



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Would he actually want Kathlerian 771 returned to his breeding pool? She could guess at the cost of rescuing her: it would be astronomical, if it could be done at all.

"I'll set a system to monitor you," Zesh said. "Where are you?"

"On my way to the Dome."

"Call your Jerian."

There was no escape. "Joplee, call Jerian Wale, site unknown."

"Kath, your vehicle's design doesn't include long range communication. I can't reach any sources more distant than a few million klicks. You should try again when we reach the Dome."

"When will that be?"

"At this pace, one hundred thirty hours."

Too long! "Will my supplies last?"

"Your water will run short. Oxygen should last long enough."

Horror crept up the back of Kath's neck; her ears and nostrils and fists curled tight shut. "Water?" Run short, in this oven? "Maybe there are some caches somewhere? By the drilling machines?"

"Probing with radar. No."

"Are there machines or vehicles in the dome that can bring me water?"

Joplee went still for a moment, probably communing with the dome. "They've been packed away. The dome believes it's closed, they won't respond from here. I could change that from inside the dome, but not from here."

She put her head in her hands. *Why* had she overridden Joplee? The silent dark rocks of Mercury passed by her view. Headstones. She had to *think*. "Wait. Joplee, my food is stored dry, isn't it?"

"Most of it is."

If she stopped eating, she'd have more water. Joplee should have thought of that. Her first move upon reaching the Dome was going to be to put Joplee back the way he'd been.

Every few waking hours, Kathlerian called for Quicksilver. There was no answer.

Kathlerian held her breath as they drove up to the dome. Would the doors open?

They did.

She wobbled into the Dome, her stomach tight and angry, Joplee humming at her heels. She could feel the emptiness, the stillness. Oddly, the dome still supplied running water to its sinks. She ran water over her hair and face and drank from her cupped hands, dripping water from her chin. The suit landed in a corner and she wrinkled her nose at the sharp sweaty stink of her skin. Finding a fresher would take too long. Minutes was too long. She started a sponge bath. "Joplee, get me a fruit basket."

"Which fruits, Kathlerian?"

"Some of everything in memory stores, a kilogram total. Send it here."

"I cannot find transport."

She sank down into a chair, the dry hot air of the dome melting dampness from her skin. Where machines had been there was only silence. All



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the robots must have gone into storage. "Revive some machines, Joplee. Get me a fruit basket and some corn bread. And pull the temperature down some."

"In process."

Kathlerian created a wall niche and monitor surface. As she worked, a small window popped up: a display of the expenses she was incurring. Daunting . . . but the Dome must have registered her as an emergency rescue project. As the last occupant of the Dome, her reserve was huge. The kicker was that it would have to be paid back, if she lived.

There were delays: much of the works had been shut down.

She was greatly relieved to find Joplee's mind still in storage under her label: Joplee Base Program.

Shut down Joplee? No, she'd have to re-order through the wall interface. She was famished! All right, call Jerian while she waited. She tapped instructions.

The words "Outside Transmission Shut Down" floated across her screen in bright yellow letters.

A robot, a float plate a meter across, arrived with fruit and a hot loaf of corn bread. Kathlerian ate while she worked the keyboard. Exterior cameras were still running, most of them. Antennas built into the roof's curved surface had a softened look. They were being etched away much faster than they could rebuild themselves.

Could the Dome build her an escape craft? "Quicksilver?"

No answer.

She'd better work through Joplee, after she gave him back his mind. The Joplee Base Program had grown into his original instructions: protect a little girl against her own mistakes. Joplee would have that talent again.

"Joplee, choose me a dinner."

"Yes, Kathlerian." Joplee froze.

Rebooting Joplee was much easier than rewriting him had been. She finished the fruit and bread and ordered a mug of stim and an overstuffed cheese and tomato handmeal with everything, using the wall connection, while she waited. In the wall screen Joplee's mind was a complicated three-dimensional shape, changing, turning.

Lights blinked on Joplee's extensors. Kath said, "Joplee?" a bit apprehensively.

"Kathlerian."

"I need to build—"

"Reviewing. You may not go out. May not build. Surface conditions are. I've killed you."

"It's all right. We'll get out. We'll just–" Joplee's lights went out. "Just build a ship. Joplee?" In the wall screen Joplee's mind had become a featureless blue sphere. She stared into it, momentarily lost.

All right, now, that didn't work, but no civilized entity would be stopped by one programming mistake. Maybe if she talked faster?

She set Joplee to reboot, and waited. When lights flashed she said rapidly, "We have to build a spacecraft, Joplee."

"Reviewing."



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"Abort review. See if Midnight Dome can build us a spacecraft."

"Antimatter stores are depleted. I can't get you fuel, Kath. The Dome is deserted. We've missed *Naglfar Marui*." Joplee's lights went out. Blue sphere of death.

She carefully made a copy of the Joplee Base Program. She'd work with that and reserve the original.

"Kathlerian?"

"Quicksilver?"

"Yes. You missed your ship." An echo of Joplee's last words.

"At least the radiation didn't get me. Are you all right?"

"Diagnostics suggest *some* corruption. You should work through Joplee."

"I can't reboot Joplee!" Her voice became a squeal.

"What have you tried?"

Kathlerian began a tearful review. Quicksilver interrupted: "I understand. He sees that he's risked your safety and he can't tolerate it."

"But he could save us. He can build us a ship. I'm registered for Emergency Survival Funding. There's plenty of credit."

"Can you reload the Joplee version that went out with you?"

Kathlerian sniffed. "I didn't save it."

"Use the wall connection. Try to design something."

Kathlerian set to work. It occurred to her to ask, "How are you doing, Quicksilver? Is the sun hurting you?"

"I'm having trouble concentrating. There's magnetic kinking in the flux tube. It's like being kicked in the head at random intervals. Kath, your problem is with the armor. If you armor a ship enough to protect you, it won't lift you to safety."

"Antimatter is very powerful stuff," she said.

"You need too big a ship. I find two antimatter motors, both too small, and only dregs of an antimatter reserve. The best drive systems from the old ship junkyard were all reworked and integrated into *Naglfar Marui*. Wait, now, I've found some fusion drivers from a long time ago, and there's all the water in the Dome for your hydrogen . . . mmm . . . no."

"There were other bases. Whole industrial cities."

"I remember. There was a molecular pump, too, right here, just outside Midnight Dome. Mercury's atmosphere is all protons from the solar wind, all ionized hydrogen: very thin once, but thicker now. We could have done something. But the pump system is long gone. So are the cities."

Kathlerian ordered an elaborate dinner. She was recovering from partial starvation, and her brain needed fuel, she told herself. Half of what she ordered was rejected. The Dome had lost much of its stores and its capability, and the Vivarium wasn't producing fresh food—nor fresh air.

She asked, "How long have we got?"

"Mercury has centuries. Mercury's surface, much less. The Dome might survive two years. Stores . . . the recycling system is quite advanced. Three to ten years."

"Longer than the Dome? Wait, now, I could dig. Cover the Dome with rock. But it couldn't radiate heat then, could it?"



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"No. I don't see a solution."

Joplee was no help. She couldn't revive Joplee unless she could present him with a way to save them. What now?

"I have a notion," Quicksilver said.

"See if you can describe it."

"You'll think I'm crazy. Hey, I am crazy, a little."

"I am not inclined to be picky!"

"I have magnetic fields for thrust and iron for reaction mass. We could accelerate the planet to a wider orbit."

Her eyes bugged. "Turn Mercury into a rocket? Are you–?" Crazy. She didn't say it.

"All I lack is a rocket nozzle. You would have to dig a hole all the way down to the core. We'd be working at Mercury's aft point, the West Pole, you might call it. But I don't control the digging machines."

Kathlerian's fists, ears, eyelids all clenched tight. She was only thirty-one standard years old! This was all Jerian Wale's fault. If he'd listed her as an adult, she'd be working directly through the base systems! But a child had to work through her guardian.

Joplee was only a machine. Must she pay with her life for mistreating a machine?

Kathlerian spoke slowly, feeling her way. "You can jet iron?"

"Iron plasma at high exhaust velocity."

"Why not just use that to dig your way *out* from the core?"

"Yes, Kath, I can blast away twelve miles' depth of regolith, but it would spray silicate meteors all over Mercury's surface. Midnight Base wouldn't survive. You wouldn't survive."

"But you would. Mmm?"

"Yes. I can compute a path to keep me safely distant from the sun, yet close enough to keep the flux tube in place; moving ever out as the sun expands. But I don't think the solar system's defense systems would allow me to do anything so reckless, unless I was acting to rescue, say, a little girl."

"I'm surprised you didn't decide to try it anyway."

Silence.

"Quicksilver, what is your form? You were written from a human mind into some kind of code—?"

"Of course."

"Would the code match our machines? No, of course not. But can you write a version of yourself to upload into Joplee?"

"Joplee doesn't have the capacity."

"A simplified version?"

"I can't write that."

"Joplee's my guardian. I need him to work the . . . Quicksilver, is there any way to register me as an adult?"

"Hack the Dome? Kath, if you make a mistake you'll be locked out."

"I think I have to try it. Let's see, the Joplee Base Program is a copy of Jerian. Base might accept its credentials . . ."

It was like using a dead man's brainscan to run an insurance scam . . .



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but it worked. The Base took Kath for Joplee, Joplee for Jerian, pending action from Jerian. She could lose it all in an instant.

That wasn't the hard part.

The hard part was running the digging machines.

Base didn't have software to run the machines itself. Kath puzzled out how to set them, the four that still worked, to converge on Mishinjer's Crater; but from then on she had to monitor them constantly.

One machine died early. Its fleck of antimatter was gone, and there was no way to refuel it. A second died of the heat, probably, while digging at the bottom of the cone. Molten iron flooded through the crater's floor and killed another while most of the floor of the cone was still in place. Then its antimatter protection failed. The machine disappeared in a blast that opened the hole wider.

Quicksilver finished the job by blasting iron up from underneath. Kath hid in the bottommost part of Midnight Dome while congealed iron droplets fell around Mercury. She'd managed to move the last machine to relative safety behind the Mishinjer Crater wall.

At Midnight Dome there was black only at the zenith: no stars. But Mercury began to move . . . not that there was any easy way to notice.

This was Kath's suggestion: Mishinjer's Crater wasn't exactly at the eastern point of the terminator. It pointed a little sunward of that. Iron plasma blasted almost straight back from Mercury, but a little downward, into the outer envelope of the sun. The corona would absorb the blast before it circled the sun to impinge on Mercury. Otherwise the surface of the planet would erode away far too quickly.

But it meant that there wasn't a hope of seeing the blast from Midnight Dome. Kathlerian just had to take Quicksilver's word that it was all working.

By the end of a standard year, supplies were not so much low as strange. Trace elements built up or were lost with each cycle of use. Details of complex molecules were lost. Kathlerian had to count on the medical systems more and more, and all the food began to taste alike. She stopped noticing the smell, almost.

The rocks around Midnight Base were changing. She could see them glow; she could see them slump. The horizon was a red blaze.

Kathlerian rarely looked out. She looked often at a wall-sized monitor with a view of a vast conical pit and a violet glow.

The pit was growing. The true rocket nozzle was a magnetic field; it didn't touch the pit. But the glow from the plasma flow was evaporating the rock.

She couldn't feel the acceleration, the thrust was too low. Quicksilver kept her informed.

She suggested games. Quicksilver played excellent chess. Kath was better at poker. Quicksilver told her about the sun's roiling wild surface, then winked out for three days. When he returned he could only spout facts at her, an endless babbling lecture. It took three whole days before Quicksilver could beat her at chess again.

On the morning of the four hundred and fifth standard day, in the half-



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sleep just before dragging herself from bed, Kath remembered Quicksilver asking her if she'd go on talking to him in his last hours. He was lonely. Had Quicksilver seen how she might strand herself on the dying planet? And had he let her do it?

Maybe there wasn't any iron jet. Visuals could be hacked. Maybe her half-year with the digging machines had only been a virtual reality game. Maybe the sun was just waiting to eat Quicksilver and Kathlerian and Joplee, who hadn't moved in a long time.

She was eating something like sweetened cereal, or trying to. Quicksilver was a three-dimensional image in the wall. Kathlerian had grown used to him: a squat, hairy creature clothed in a shapeless robe, with a blade of nose and funny ears that didn't fold up. He wasn't paying her any attention, but he was company.

He blurred. Cleared, and gasped. "Kath? I'm *buzzing*. I hope that isn't the sun g—"

Then Kathlerian was looking at someone else.

The cereal bowl rolled across the floor. Kath stared at a man similar to herself, with wrinkled nostrils and fanlike pink ears. Stupidly she asked, "Who are *you?*"

The man glared, not quite at her. "Whoever hears this message, you are drafted. Do you understand? I am Jerian Wale 9000—"

"Jerian!"

"—have the authority to commandeer property that is deemed to be abandoned. You are drafted into the service of the Community of Solar Worlds and assured adequate compensation. Whatever is causing motion of the planet Mercury, you are to stop it at once. If you do not cease at once, we will be forced to fire on you."

"Quicksilver!"

"I heard. He's going to fire on a planet?"

"But he's ordered us to stop!"

"We can't. Turning off the jet would take tens of hours, and I don't want to. Talk to him, Kath. He might be light-hours away. You'll never get anything said unless you talk across each other."

"Well—all right." She didn't much like the man's face nor his expression. "Jerian Wale 9000, I'm Kathlerian Wale of the Bear Clade, born in Bear Three Bubble. I've been left behind at Midnight Base on Mercury. My own fault. There are only the two of us. We're trying to move the planet to where I can be rescued. After all, there's nobody to be risked! Nobody's around, we're too close to the Sun for any kind of mining or research or tourism, and nobody else here on Mercury—" She bit it off. It sounded like she was whining.

Jerian Wale was repeating himself, cycling.

He looped for half an hour. Then he blurred, listened, and spoke. "Kathlerian, you've claimed priority under emergency action. I doubt you have any concept of how expensive that is or what the penalties are. Who is your companion? Wait, I find a record—yes. Quicksilver, Widge Hordon of the Vance Clade as of the Second Deep Reworking Period. Quicksilver, please respond."



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Kath asked, "Quicksilver?"

"I've got nothing to hide, Kath. I'm sending him everything I have. You look very twitchy. Do an exercise program while we wait."

Waiting ran hour after hour. Quicksilver didn't answer queries. When Kath pressed him, his brute image disappeared. She tired of waiting, and slept.

He was there when she woke. "We have an agreement," Quicksilver said.

"He didn't want to talk to *me?*"

"We're more similar, Kath. Jerian is nearly as old as I am and has more intelligence and wider experience. Of course he thinks faster, too, but that's nothing compared to the lightspeed delay."

Badly humiliated, Kath shut down Quicksilver's image.

Two days of that and she couldn't stand it any more. She booted up her link and asked, "So, are we going to live?"

"More or less."

"What's *that* mean?"

"You've seen a list of expenses, but they don't include possible damage claims. We've moved a huge mass without filing flight plans or waiting for responses. We've sprayed gigatons of iron vapor into the sun. I may have covered some of that, or all, by claiming Mercury as salvage. The planet was completely lost to human profiteers until you and I intervened. Now there's easy access to a source of iron and rare earths. Bidding has already started. Also, Jerian has arranged to store a recording of myself. It took me time to send it. I'm sorry if I've been ignoring you."

So he hadn't noticed her ignoring him! So be it. "And now there are two of you?"

"Not for long. We've arranged to settle Mercury in the L4 point of Venus. The mass should stay there long enough to be mined before the Sun expands to take both planets. But we're getting too far out from the Sun. The flux tube will cut off in about twenty days. You'll be offloaded, and Mercury will coast into place without further guidance."

Somehow she hadn't seen this coming. "You're still going to *die?*"

"Well. 'Die' is such a vague word. Jerian will hold me in storage, he says. I won't have anything like civil rights unless and until he finds some reason to revive me."

"I'll—"

"Don't promise anything, Kath. You might be a pauper before this is over. The bidding for Mercury isn't enthusiastic. If there's any profit, though, you'll get half and you'll be my executor for the rest."

"*Me?* I don't have any skills, Quicksilver."

"Kath, it can't be Jerian. I don't want to give him a motive not to revive me. We thrashed that out."

She was being entrusted with the very life of an ancient being. Her tongue thickened and her ears curled against her head. "Thank you."

Quicksilver did not answer, so she asked, "Play another game of chess?"

A board appeared on her monitor, with green and blue pawns that



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looked like planetesimals. The knights were iron crabs. The kings and queens were domes.

The sun shrank. Even so, the Base refrigeration system howled. Mercury was turning now, if very slowly. The sun was a vast, stormy red half-globe. It covered a quarter of the sky, as if the world was falling into it. Realistically, everything was. Venus wouldn't last forever.

The flux tube ruptured in a tremendous lightning bolt that stretched all the way into the sun. The whole planet shuddered. When it was over, part of Midnight Base was open to space. Kathlerian was caught in the dining area. Her nose, ears, throat, and other sphincters all snapped shut. She felt internal pressure trying to rip out of her, and she ran for the nearest double doors, her mind howling that it wasn't fair!

And she made it, but from that moment she had no food source. She had water: spigots that had fed the Vivarium.

Venus was only a pink pinprick, changing little as Mercury approached its fourth Lagrange point. And Quicksilver was—but dead is such a vague word. Dead as Joplee, anyway.

She didn't hear anything at first. Kath had grown used to the refrigeration pumps. She found the Base unnervingly silent. She spent more and more time sleeping.

She dreamed of bones rattling together, and someone calling her name. "Kathlerian Wale 771, I'm Joplee. You are to come with me."

But Joplee was dead.

She thrashed and rolled to her feet. Something was coming toward her, a spiky humanoid shape. She shook her head. "You're not Joplee."

"Jerian Wale 9000 has upgraded me. I am a simplified version of Jerian, with a new set of restrictions. Kath, dear, you are to be upgraded as a young adult. Jerian says that you have certainly been behaving as one, and you might as well accept the obligations that go with the job. We'll leave your current Joplee version here."

"Jerian still won't talk to me? Is he angry?"

"No, Jerian is pleased with the way matters have worked out. He just doesn't have time to talk to you at this time. Kath, I have a ship. I'm to take you directly to Mars."

"What's on Mars?"

"A subset of the Bear Clade has assembled. Medical facilities are on hand. You'll be treated to mature into an adult. Jerian is there too. What would you like to take from Mercury?"

Nothing. Memories. "Video imagery. I've stored a lot of memory in the Base."

"I'll store the Base mind in the ship. Anything else?"

Joplee, the real Joplee. She set her hand on him, the old Joplee. It felt as if she was leaving her childhood behind, and a crime she would never repeat.

"Nothing." ○



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# THE 2005 DELL MAGAZINES AWARD

(Continued from page 11)

We are actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions is Monday, January 2, 2006. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned, and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is a $10 entry fee, with up to three stories accepted for each fee paid. A special flat fee of $25 is available for an entire classroom of writers. Instructors should send all the submissions in one or more clearly labeled envelopes with a check or money order. Checks should be made out to the Dell Magazines Award. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please do not put your name on the actual story.

Before entering the contest, please contact Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. Rick can be reached care of:

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*Rwilber@chuma.cas.usf.edu*

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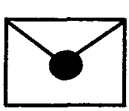

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# ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

**JONATHAN STRANGE & MR. NORRELL**
**by Susanna Clarke**
**with illustrations by**
**Portia Rosenberg**
**Bloomsbury, $27.95 (hc)**
**ISBN: 1058234-416-7**

In the wake of the Harry Potter books and *The Lord of the Rings* on screen, it doesn't take much publishing smarts to figure that fantasy is hotter than ever. No surprise, then, that Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* was given an enormous first printing and hyped in every available medium as a grownup's equivalent of Harry Potter. What is perhaps a surprise is that it actually lives up to the hype.

*Strange / Norrell* combines the flavor of an early Victorian novel with an alternate history in which magic not only works, but plays a major role in history. The combination not only succeeds, but the result is a genuine page-turner, At 782 pages, that's a lot of turning, but worth the effort.

The premise is that England was once ruled by magicians, but by the early 1800s the art had degenerated to an eccentric hobby. In fact, the few who do call themselves magicians are really more interested in talking about the history of magic and collecting old books than in attempting to cast spells. A group of these dilettantes meeting in York (once the center of English magic) learns that a magician, Mr. Norrell, who claims to cast spells as well as to study them, has set up in the neighborhood. To their astonishment, he not only turns out to have real powers, but enforces an oath upon them to give up magic entirely. He then goes to London, where he intends to offer his services to the government in order to spur a revival of English magic.

Complications ensue; he falls into a wrong crowd, who nonetheless manage to introduce him to people of genuine power and influence. And he ends up doing one of them a magical favor—reviving a recently deceased loved one—that has far more serious consequences than he expected. In particular, it brings a powerful and amoral Fairy king into the lives of several other characters. But Norrell, now the toast of fashionable London and an important government contractor, seems unaware of the chaos that is brewing.

Around the same time, Norrell learns of a young man who has also begun to practice magic, and despite some misgivings and jealousy, takes him as an apprentice. Jonathan Strange is far more personable than the reclusive Norrell, and far more adventurous in his approach to the magical arts. As a result, Strange is sent to assist the British forces in the war against Napoleon, where his success brings him power and influence of his own. This has the inevitable result of bringing about an estrangement between him and his mentor. Much of the last half of the novel revolves around Strange's discovery of the consequences of Norrell's magical bargain, and the inevitable confrontation between them.



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Clarke's plot is complex and unclichéd, original enough to make the book a success on that level alone. There is no quest for some magical object, no magical battle between good and evil (although moral issues are always near the center of the book), and the conclusion is as emotionally complex as the buildup.

Clarke also has a wonderful cast of characters, including a few historical figures—Wellington, Lord Byron, Byron's publisher John Murray—none of whom intrude excessively. And while many of the minor characters are variants of stock figures from Victorian fiction, Clarke portrays them with enough warmth to keep them from feeling like caricatures—much the way that some of Dickens's minor characters transcend their two-dimensional portrayal.

The point that raises *Jonathan Strange* to another level is Clarke's affectionate but gently teasing imitation of the style and manner of a Victorian historical novel. Her language has just the right veneer of archaism—much of it in a few old-fashioned spellings (chuse, shew, headach)—to convey the feeling of an earlier period. Footnotes fill in the history of this alternate England and its magic. And she adopts the trick—which we associate with Dickens, but which has a long history both before and after him—of giving many of the characters names just peculiar enough to suggest some quality without quite becoming allegorical. So in addition to Strange, an important secondary character is Mr. Drawlight, a pair of walk-ons are Mr. and Mrs. Honeyfoot, and so on—just enough to intrigue and amuse, without becoming an annoyance.

A delight; possibly the best fantasy of the year.

**THE FAMILY TRADE**
**by Charles Stross**
**Tor, $24.95 (hc)**
**ISBN: 0-765-30929-7**

Having already made a mark with post-singularity space opera and neo-Lovecraft, Stross takes a fling at alternate-worlds fantasy, and comes up with another winner.

The setup finds Miriam Beckstein, a tech journalist working for a Boston firm, finding out too much about a powerful company's illegal dealings, and getting fired almost before she can figure out what's gone wrong. It's made very clear to her that pursuing the story could get her in real, i.e., fatal, trouble. Her only ally, at this point, is Paulette, a coworker who lost her job at the same time. The two of them decide to stay in touch and help each other if things get too tough.

Then Miriam's foster mother, who raised her after she and her fatally wounded mother were found in the woods near their home, gives her a box of her belongings. Among them is a locket with an intricate design. Staring at it, Miriam finds herself transported from her living room to a wooded area, where she sees armored men on horseback pass by in the night. One of them fires a gun at her, and she flees into the woods. Hiding, she realizes that the locket was somehow responsible for her transportation; she stares into it again and finds herself back home, shaken but unhurt.

At this point, Miriam's reporter's instincts take over; she has to know just what she's found. She equips herself for a stay in the woods, gets Paulette to drive her to a secluded area, and returns to the other world, where she learns enough to recognize it as a structured feudal society. Taking pains to avoid exposing herself to



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the rulers, she returns home—only to learn that she's underestimated the rulers' resources when they come and abduct her to the alternate world. And then the real fun begins....

Miriam is, of course, a missing heir to one of the ruling families of this alternate reality, where the ability to travel between worlds gives them trade advantages both in their world and in ours. The Americas are sparsely settled, and Europe remains in a quasi-medieval stage of development. Miriam's appearance reopens a complex dynastic squabble that was settled a few years back when she and her mother disappeared—victims of hostile action. The family elders see the best solution as marrying Miriam off to one of the scions of a rival family, a solution Miriam herself does not embrace. But the alternatives are no more attractive, since most of them appear to require her permanent "removal" from the scene. Returning to our world—which she would welcome—is not one of the options.

Stross knows the previous models of this kind of fantasy, particularly Roger Zelazny's "Amber" series, and he makes effective use of the opportunity to spin a web of Byzantine political intrigue. Miriam is a smart, tough heroine, just feisty enough to take on the powers that be, and just vulnerable enough to keep the reader's sympathies on her side. The world-building is first-class, the characters are convincingly complex, and the plot full of surprises. Could well be a break-out series for Stross.

**THE MEQ**
**by Steve Cash**
**Del Rey, $13.95 (tp)**
**ISBN: 0-345-47092-3**

A first novel (and the first of a series) that effectively sets a "hidden race" story against American history of just about a century ago.

The story's narrator is Zianno Zezen ("Z" to his friends), whom we meet as he celebrates his twelfth birthday in 1881, just before his parents are killed in a train wreck on their way west from St. Louis. Rescued from the wreckage by an eccentric peddler named Solomon, and brought back to St. Louis, Z begins by living his life much the same as any other boy, becoming a baseball fan (the Cardinals are new in town) and having boyish adventures, unaware that he is not just another normal human.

He begins to understand his true character as he meets Ray, another of his kind. Ray tells him something about what it means to be Meq. The Meq are apparently a subgroup of the Basques, distinguished by freezing in their growth at the age of twelve and then living almost indefinitely. In addition, Z has the "power of the stones," an amulet given to him by his mother that lets him command others, as when he stops a group of robbers from attacking Solomon. He and Ray become friends, and begin to share their adventures.

The next big change in his life comes when a Cardinals player dies after an all-night drinking bout, and leaves his twin daughters in the care of Mrs. Bennings, the woman who looks after Z (and who is Solomon's lover when he returns from his travels). Z learns to love the twins, even as he remains to all outer appearances a twelve-year-old boy. He meets others of his race: a girl who has the physical skills of a world-class tumbler, and then an assassin named Fleur de Mal. In the aftermath of a devastating tornado, the Fleur kills Mrs. Bennings and one of the twins, and diverts Z's life into a



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burning quest for revenge. Much of the rest of the book is driven by that quest.

At the same time, it is a romp through the history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Z's travels take him to New Orleans, then to sea, where he becomes an accomplished sailor; then to the western US, where he meets the family his parents were going to visit when they were killed; then to Canada. He arrives in China at the time of the Boxer Rebellion, and wanders parts of the country far beyond European influence in search of a mysterious Meq who knows the deepest secrets of their race. And he travels to the African desert, where he eventually confronts his enemy in the days of World War I.

Author Cash, a long-time member of the Ozark Mountain Daredevils rock group, makes interesting use of history and local color, and his original approach to fantasy makes up for the occasional first-novel lapses (mostly of the "if only I had known" variety). Worth checking out if you like magic but are getting tired of the usual trappings of epic fantasy.

**THE MYSTERIES**
**by Lisa Tuttle**
**Bantam Spectra, $21.00 (hc)**
**ISBN: 0-553-38296-9**

Lisa Tuttle's latest, set in present-day England and Scotland, begins as a mystery and rapidly mutates into a fantasy.

Ian Kennedy is an American detective living in London, specializing in tracing missing persons. His interest in detective work began when he was a small boy, and his own father abandoned his family. Teenaged Ian managed to trace him to a nearby city—with anticlimactic results. That might have been the end of it. But after he broke up with a girlfriend, a family friend sent him to England to trace a missing daughter. Ian solved the case and ended up staying in London far longer than he'd planned on.

But, of late, business has gone badly, and as the story begins he's come to depend on regular handouts from his American mother to get through. Now Laura Lansky, an attractive American woman working in London, hires him to find her college-age daughter Peri, who vanished two and a half years ago after a date with her English boyfriend. Ian looks through the various clues she gives him, including statements of four people who saw Peri—bedraggled and apparently pregnant—a few months after her disappearance, when she called Laura from a rural pay phone in Scotland. He also interviews Hugh, her boyfriend, who tells of taking her to a strange nightclub where the owner played chess with him, claiming to have won Peri. The next day, after Peri's disappearance, the club was no longer to be found.

Ian recognizes a pattern: both Hugh's story and a fantasy Peri wrote in one of her notebooks parallel the Celtic legend of Etain and Mither, where a king of the Sidhe falls in love with a mortal woman and takes her away to his kingdom. At this point, it is revealed that Ian has dealt before with abductions of mortals by the Sidhe, and that is the appeal of Peri's case to him. Neither Laura nor Hugh are initially ready to accept his interpretation of the facts, but eventually he convinces them. The three of them travel to Scotland to attempt the rescue.

Tuttle alternates Ian's story with snippets of tales of fairy abductions, mostly British, mingled with other



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mysterious disappearances, many apparently historical. And Ian jumps back and forth between the present and his own past, giving the story depth and resonance that yield pay dirt when the trio finally does attempt the rescue. Very effective mingling of folklore elements with a modern British setting to bring new impact to a theme that goes back centuries.

**MARQUE AND REPRISAL**
**by Elizabeth Moon**
**Del Rey, $24.95 (hc)**
**ISBN: 0-345-44758-1**

A sequel to Moon's *Trading in Danger*, in which the daughter of a powerful merchant family broke away from her parents' pacifist sympathies.

Kylara Vatta is nursing one of her family's transport vessels back to her home planet after getting herself involved in a shooting war. As she comes into one of the trading ports along her route, she learns that most of the family elders were killed in a sneak attack on the family home. Other attacks have taken out vital lines of inter-planetary communications maintained by her family. She herself barely survives an assassination attempt, combined with attempted sabotage of her ship. At that point, she determines to find the enemy and make them pay.

Ky's first priority is getting her ship and her crew in shape to protect themselves. She hires Staff Sergeant Gordon Martin—a man who's being pushed into retirement from his embassy guard job for being too conscientious—to oversee the ship's defenses, and to give her crew the rudiments of military training. At the next couple of stops, they take on new crew members—and a surprise passenger, Ky's older cousin Stella, long considered the black sheep of the family because of an embarrassing sexual liaison in her youth. Stella, Ky soon discovers, is much deeper and more competent than appears on the surface. And with Stella comes another passenger, her ex-lover Rafe—who turns out to have a full package of espionage skills at his disposal.

From there, Moon sends Ky and her ship on a roller-coaster ride of combat and intrigue, with a significant emphasis on the welding of her unpromising crew into an efficient team capable of handling itself when the chips are down. The characters are variations on more or less familiar types, but Moon makes them interesting enough to maintain interest. As with much of what we tend to think of as "military SF," the shadow of Heinlein can be seen in much of the overall development of the story, although Moon is a mature enough writer to bring plenty of her own insight and experience to the book—including the very relevant experience of having been a woman in the military.

Fast-moving action set in a classic space-opera universe, with plenty of plot surprises and a likeably tough heroine. The final space battle is as good as I've seen.

**PARALLEL WORLDS**
**by Michio Kaku**
**Doubleday, $27.50 (hc)**
**ISBN: 0-385-50986-3**

This book on cutting-edge physics has a strong SFnal theme, and while the nominal focus is on "theories of everything," the scientifically literate SF reader who picks it up will find plenty to sink the teeth into.

Kaku is particularly interested in M-Theory, in which our universe is considered to be one of innumerable



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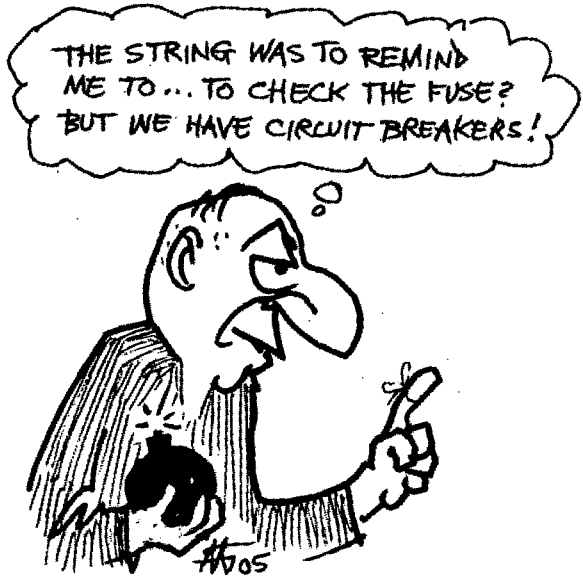
parallel universes separated by tiny distances in eleven-dimensional space. This spin-off from String Theory is at the moment a hot topic among physicists. Since it seems to offer a quick and easy route to parallel universes, it has been adopted by such SF writers as Alastair Reynolds.

Kaku spends a fair amount of time tracing the origins of the new theories in Quantum Mechanics and General Relativity, the key formulations of modern physics. The historical section benefits from a wonderful cast of characters, including the irreverent physicists Gamow and Feynman, as well as the more familiar icons of Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein.

What sets this book apart from the dozens of others that cover similar territory is Kaku's obvious enjoyment of and familiarity with SF. To illustrate the ideas being discussed, he cites everything from *Star Trek* episodes to Niven's "All the Myriad Ways." He also shows a willingness to speculate on the broader meanings of the physics; the last few chapters look at ways a sufficiently advanced civilization could exploit the existence of parallel universes to escape the heat death of its home universe. And he plays interestingly with the tension between the Copernican principle (we and our place in the universe are not special) and the anthropic principle (we could not exist if the universe were not somehow designed to make us possible).

While this certainly isn't the last word on the subject—physics and cosmology are changing so rapidly nowadays that some new theory or discovery is likely to shake things up even before this review gets into print—it's still a very good overview of where things are right now. Best of all, it's one of the most SF-friendly science books I've read in years. ○



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# SF Conventional Calendar

The July Fourth weekend is coming right up. And don't forget WorldCon plans. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out.Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## JUNE 2005

30-July 3—**Origins.** For info, write: **250 N. High St. #23, Columbus OH 43215.** Or phone: **(614) 255-4500** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) originsgames.com. (E-mail) custserv@gama.com.** Con will be held in: San Antonio TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Airport Hilton. Guests will include: none announced. Year's big gaming con.

30-July 3—**Starfleet International. ic2005@region3.com.** *Airport Hilton, San Antonio TX.* Star Trek fan club annual meet.

## JULY 2005

1–4—**WesterCon. calgaryin2005.org.** Westin, Calgary AB. S. M. Stirling, Dave Duncan, Tom Doherty, David Hartwell.

1–4—**GaylaxiCon. gaylaxicon.org/2005.** Hyatt, Cambridge MA. Lois McMaster Bujold. For gay fans and their friends.

1–4—**Anime Expo. (714) 937-2994. anime-expo.org/.** Convention Center, Anaheim CA. Japanese animation convention.

7–10—**AnthroCon. anthrocon.org.** Adam's Mark, Philadelphia PA. "Saluting 'Heroes'" Anthropomorphics/furries.

8–10—**ReaderCon. readercon.org.** Marriott, Burlington MA. Kate Wilhelm, Joe Haldeman. Celebrating written SF.

8–10—**Shore Leave. (410) 496-4456. shore-leave.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Trek & SF media actors.

15–17—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. parsec-sff.org/confluence.** Airport Sheraton. Tamora Pierce.

15–17—**Trinoc*Con, Box 10633, Raleigh NC 27605. trinoc-con.org.** Marriott, Durham NC. J. R. Lansdale, C. Keegan.

15–17—***Toronto* Trek, Box 7097, *Toronto* ON M5W 1X7. (416) 410-8266. tcon.ca.** *Doubletree Int'l. Plaza Hotel.*

15–18—**ConEstoga, 440 S. Gary Ave. #45, Tulsa OK 74104. (918) 445-2094. sftulsa.org.** Sheraton. G.R.R. Martin.

16–17—**Japan Nat'l. Con, Nippon07, 4-20-5-604, Mure, Mitaka, Tokyo 181-0002, Japan. hamacon2.com.** Yokohama.

22–24—**Earthbound: 2005, c/o Box 2213, Plant City FL 33565. earthbound2005.com.** Tampa FL. "Space:1999" con.

22–24—**ConMisterio, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. conmysterio.org.** Doubletree. Joe Lansdale, Derie. Mystery fiction.

27–30—**Romance Writers Con, c/o 3707 Fm 1960 W. #555, Houston TX 77068. (281) 440-6885. rwanational.org.** Reno NV.

29–31—**Costume College, 2148 S. Fremont Ave. #24, Alhambra CA 91803. costumecollege.org.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA.

29–31—**HorroRama, Box 5948, Buffalo Grove IL 60089. flashbackweekend.com.** Crowne Plaza, Rosemont (Chicago) IL.

29–31—**Accio, 26 Discovery House, Newby Place, London E14 0HA, UK. accio.org.uk.** Reading UK. Harry Potter con.

## AUGUST 2005

4–8—***Interaction*, Box 58009, *Louisville* KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** *Glasgow Scotland.* $195/£110.

5–7—**Bindweed, 81 Western Rd., London E13 9JE, UK.** York, UK. Low-key relax-a-con.

12–14—**Official Star Trek, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com.** Hilton, Las Vegas NV.

12–15—**ConVersion, Box 20098, Calgary AB T2P 4J2. con-version.org.** George R.R. Martin.

## SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** *NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow.* $95+.

## AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. $150.

## AUGUST 2007

30–Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org.** Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. $160.

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# NEXT ISSUE

## SEPTEMBER ISSUE

Hugo and Nebula-winner **Frederik Pohl**, one of the true giants of the field, returns after too long an absence with our lead story for September, telling a vivid and intricate tale of unexpected connections and unforeseen consequences that spans several "Generations," tying them together in a complex skein of passions and resentments that ultimately leads the whole human race down a dark and dangerous road to an ominous destination, step by logical step. This is thoughtful and thought-provoking near-future SF at its best; don't miss it!

## ALSO IN SEPTEMBER

Hugo and Nebula-winner **Brian W. Aldiss**, another of the giants of the form, returns to spin another web of politics and intrigue in a troubled near-future, as he shows us the lengths that need to be gone to in order to assure the opening of a vital "Pipeline" in the face of sabotage and terrorism; new writer **Lou Antonelli** makes a light-hearted *Asimov's* debut with the not-terribly-likely steampunk saga of the launching of "A Rocket for the Republic"; **William Barton** takes us to another and somewhat grimmer alternate world where the space program worked out quite a bit differently, for the story of a group of astronauts whose stay on a "Harvest Moon" turns out to be longer than they, or anyone else, anticipated; new writer **Daryl Gregory**, making his own *Asimov's* debut, tells a moving story of memory, identity, and loss that's all couched in the "Second Person, Present Tense"; the popular and prolific **Robert Reed** demonstrates that being "Finished" can mean something quite different to one person than it does to another; and new writer **John Phillip Olsen**, making yet another *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a conquered future Earth to test just how far even "The Company Man" can be pushed before his conscience begins to stir and wake.

## EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column delves into "Robert Burton, Anatomist of Melancholy"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column turns an inquisitive eye on "SETI and Such"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our September issue on sale at your newsstand on August 2, 2005. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

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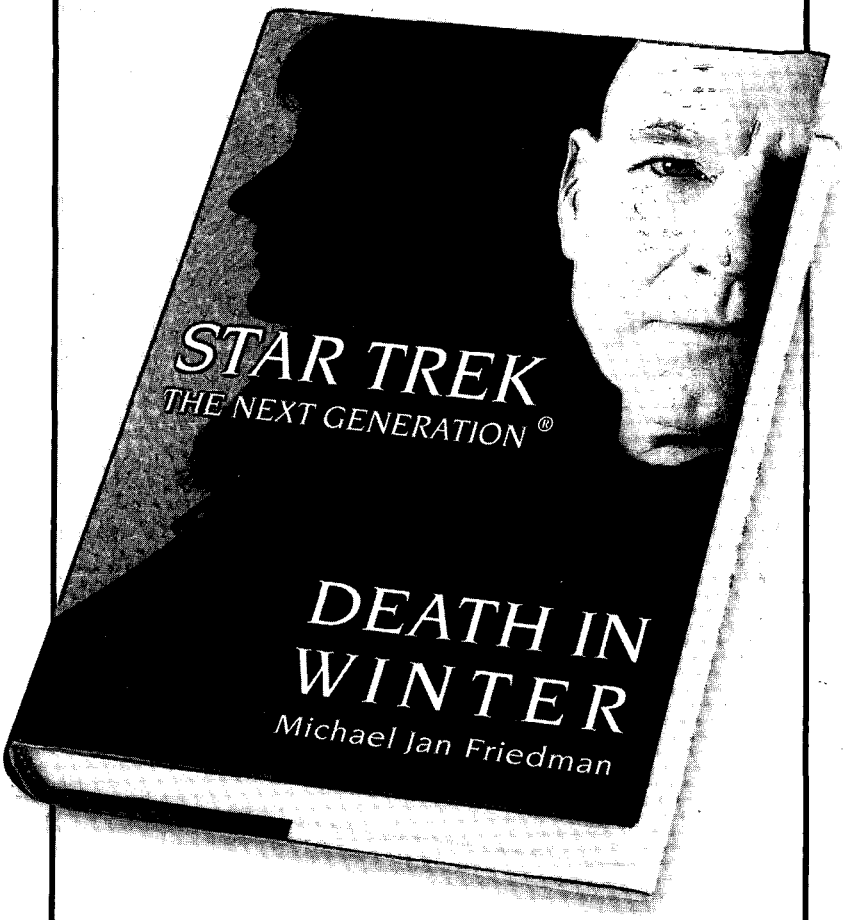
# Destinies will be forged and shattered...




The Romulan Empire will be shaken to its ancient foundations, and Jean-Luc Picard's life will be changed...forever.

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